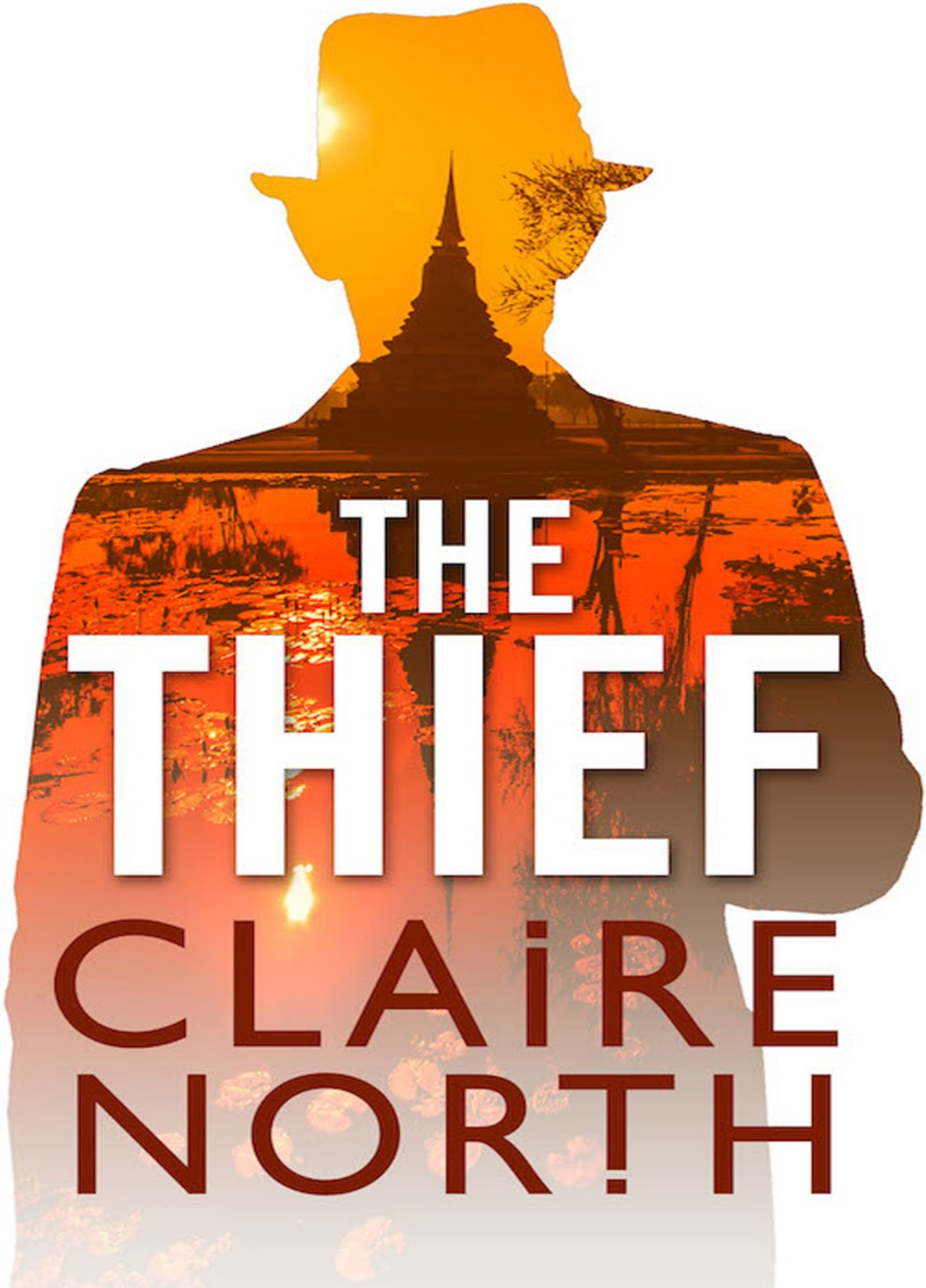
THE GAMESHOUSE 2



THE THIEF

CLAIRE NORTH

The Thief

The Second Gameshouse Novella

Claire North

www.redhookbooks.com

Chapter 1

The great game is coming.

Not yet, not yet, the board is not quite prepared, the pieces not in place, but it is coming so soon now. Why has she not destroyed us? Beautiful one, graceful in all things, why has she not crushed us when we were so much easier to crush?

Perhaps because in all things, the greatest game is the one you most enjoy.

Chapter 2

Remy Burke was drunk when he took the bet, but that does not excuse him. He had been a player for some fifty years, though he looked not a day over forty, and should have known better. We watched him turn down the first drink that was presented, politely once, then firmly again, and respected his wisdom in doing so. Yet when Abhik Lee sat down opposite him and in a single gulp drained his whisky down, Remy Burke's pride was raised, for here was an opponent of some seven years playing, a whippersnapper by the standards of the Gameshouse, daring him with his grey-green eyes to be the coward.

"Are you not drinking?" asked Lee, and at those words, Remy was drinking, he was gulping it down, for he knew perfectly well that he could hold his drink and doubted nothing that this was a game he would win against the half-breed player before him.

Six whiskys in, he growled, "What are we playing for?"

"Nothing at all," replied Lee, draining his glass. "Sometimes the game has no meaning."

Oh, reckless Remy!

Foolish Remy, buoyed up on drugs and pride!

Every game has its meaning.

Every single one.

You should have asked us; we would have whispered in your ear, told you of the day Lee played a New Jersey arms dealer at a game of battleships in 1933. Two cruisers and a frigate went to the bottom of the sea that day, and when Lee was declared the winner he won not only the other man's fleet, but his sea legs and iron stomach, and the beaten player had chronic diarrhoea to the end of his days. We thought perhaps, on the eighth or ninth glass to have stepped forward, to have warned you – but the umpires were there in their white robes, and they caught our eye, and we knew that you were playing now, even though you did not know it yourself.

Oh Remy, you should not have underestimated your opponent, for he would not have dared you to drink if he did not know he could win.

Yet the drink was not the game; at least, not the game that Abhik Lee wanted to play.

It was merely the opening of the trap.

Chapter 3

The Gameshouse.

There have always been houses where games were played, but this is no common parlour, no place for dice and the snap of a card upon the table. Surely if that is the distraction you desire, you may play in the lower league with the lesser men, who bet only money and pride. But if you are good enough – if you have the will to win – then step through these silver doors and come into the higher place where we ancient souls and scheming players lay our bets down in life and blood, in sight and souls. I could tell you of the games I have played – of the castles I have captured and held, seven thousand men at my command to protect a flag from my opponent! Of the kings I have enthroned and overturned, the monuments I have built, the risks I have made upon the stock exchange, racing my player to a monopoly of oil, of timber, of iron, of men. Of the murderers I have pursued and the times I have been hunted; of the races I have undertaken across the world, a crew of twenty and a single caravel at my command, and the strange pieces and men I have played to achieve my victory.

But not yet – not yet. It is not yet my time.

Therefore let us, you and I, look again at poor Remy Burke, who is a good, if unflashy player, and who woke one hot morning on the floor of his hotel room in Bangkok in the high summer of 1938, the taste of bile in his mouth and a hangover popping out through his eyes, and in a moment of stark terror, *remembered*.

Very little of the drinking he remembered, it is true, nor is he entirely sure how he came to be in this place, at this time. But as he raised his head from the floor and beheld the cotton trousers and linen suit of the man who sat before him, recollection returned and kicked against his skull almost harder than the hammer of the liquor within his belly.

He made it to the window in time to puke violently, wretchedly into the street below.

Remy's father was English; his mother was French.

This was a most unfashionable union.

His people were something in India; hers were something in Laos, but that was long ago and far away, all dead, all gone. The Gameshouse gives life to those who play it well, but they are few, and they must learn to leave lesser things behind. Yet for all that Remy won many a hand and lived for many a decade, perhaps something of his family haunted him, for always he returned to the lands of his birth, wandering through the islands of Malaysia, the hills of Laos, the great rivers of Vietnam, until at last, like a moth to the flame, he comes again to Bangkok.

The French and British empires glowered at each other through South-East Asia, grabbing a peninsula here, an ancient people there, until at last only one country remained, Thailand, blessed Thailand, ready to be crushed like the butterfly beneath the leopard's paw. The king looked at the British and saw that only the French could save him; looked at the French and saw that only the British would keep them at bay and in this state, and implausibly somehow, through gunships and concessions, Thailand remained free, a worm of neutral territory between the jaws of colonial sharks. Yet how free can any country be when all around great empires prepare for war?

So, like Remy, to Bangkok we are drawn, and now we sit, unseen observers, to see what new fate will befall our player as he wipes the last of the night's excess from his lips and slips down to the floor by the window-sill.

"What did I agree to?" he asked at last.

The man in the linen suit didn't answer immediately, but half turned in his wicker chair to look out of the hotel window. In the street below, the city was all change. Imported black cars idled irritably behind pony traps laden with straw and rice; three-wheeled rickshaws bounced round bicycles and grumbling trucks. Bangkok was a city where worlds collided; the smart suits of Western men and Eastern men who aspired to be more West than the West; the dusty sarongs of the running children; the torn trousers of the street-seller hawking his wares; the robe of the Buddhist monk pawing at passers-by, clinging on until they paid.

"Tell me it isn't blind man's buff," groaned Remy at his companion's quiet. "The last game took seven months and I was on a walking stick for five."

“It’s not blind man’s buff.”

“Good, then…” This sentence was interrupted as Remy once again crawled, with surprising speed for a man so chemically damaged, up onto the window’s edge, supporting himself by his elbows and, half gagging, half spitting, stuck his head out into the street and failed to vomit. If the sight of a near-six-foot Anglo-Frenchman with grey-flecked beard and deep brown hair attempting to puke into the street below aroused any interest, no one remarked on it. This was Bangkok; the city had seen worse.

Nausea came, nausea went, and down once again he sat on the floor, gasping for breath.

The man in the suit lent back in the chair, one leg folded over the other, hands steepled together, the tips of his fingers bouncing rhythmically against the end of his nose. His face was young – an unnatural young: too smooth, too soft, as if all the time had been sanded away – but his hair was silver-white, paler than the suit he wore. At last he said, “What I don’t understand, Remy, is how you could possibly have let yourself get so drunk. And with a man like Abhik Lee! We all know that he’s as malicious a little wart as ever set foot in the higher league.”

“It wasn’t part of a deadly plan, if that’s what you mean.”

“Abhik takes things personally.”

“He’s young; he’ll burn out. Ten years – twenty at most – he’ll play a stupid hand for a stupid stake. You feel so strongly about it, Silver, why don’t you pull him down?”

The man addressed as Silver shook his head softly. “Abhik won’t play me. He hunts around the fringes, looking for smaller fish to fry. One day he might have the guts to take me on – but not yet.”

“Thank you very much,” croaked Remy. “Care to tell me which pan I’m sizzling in today?”

“You still keep cash under the mattress?”

“Got about fifty baht.”

“You’ll need it.”

“Silver,” growled Remy, shifting his still-uneasy weight on the floor, “what’s the game?”

“On your eleventh shot, I believe you agreed to a game of hide-and-seek.”

Silence.

Remy closed his eyes, head rolling back. “Right,” he said. Then thought.

Then, “Right.”

Silence again.

“What’s the board?” he asked at last.

“Thailand.”

“What – all of it?”

“All of it.”

“And the cards?”

“I can’t say what the seeker’s been dealt, but I imagine the resources are substantial. Assume he has some high cards in police, government and the temples. He’s probably also drawn a few mercenaries, ex-spies, ex-cons, maybe a banker or two.”

“How long have I got to beat?”

“You’re asking me Abhik’s form?”

“Yes – you watch everything – yes, I’m asking you his goddamn form.”

“Last time Abhik Lee played hide-and-seek, the board was Palestine. He remained hidden for fifteen months, and when the sides were swapped he found his opponent in eleven days. You don’t have to hide for long if you know you can seek fast.”

“That’s great, because in this country I probably can’t hide more than a week.”

“Abhik Lee is a proficient player of this game; I’d urge you to try and hide for a little longer than that.”

“What were the stakes?” Again, silence from the man called Silver. “Don’t give me that face: what were the goddamn stakes?!”

“Abhik bet twenty years of his life.”

“That’s not so much.”

“It is for Abhik; a huge wager for one so young, in fact, fascinating in its boldness.”

“I can afford to pay if I lose.”

“You bet your memory.”

Silence.

Silence.

When Remy spoke again, his voice was soft, and very sober. “All of it?”

“All of it.”

Silence.

“How long do I have?”

“The game begins at noon; you have twenty minutes. I imagine that Abhik is already preparing the assault against this hotel; I’d urge you to be ready to run when the clock strikes.”

For a moment, Remy was still. Then, with a half-nod of his head, he wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and crawled on hands and knees towards the bed, hefting the mattress to one side to reveal a paper envelope beneath. Travel documents, a little money – less than he would have liked – when had Remy got sloppy, we wonder? Doubtless as he looked through his meagre haul, he wondered the same.

As he crawled to his feet, bile again rose in Remy’s throat and he leaned against the wall a moment, waiting for the feeling to pass.

“Any rules I need to know about?” he asked through heavy breathing.

“No deployment of resources beyond those on the board.”

“Meaning?”

“Don’t write for help to your banker in India or the hunter you won in Rangoon.”

“You know about the hunter?”

“As you said: I watch people’s form.”

“All right. Only resources in Thailand. What else?”

“They can hurt you.”

“Really?”

“The seeker has to verify the win in person, has to touch you to make the tag. Killing a player is against the rules, but if Abhik’s men catch you before Abhik arrives on-scene, they are permitted to hold you even if you resist until he arrives.”

“Can I hurt Abhik?” he asked, with teeth-grinding relish.

“You can kill his pieces, and I suppose you could try to injure him – however it might be unwise while you’re hiding.”

“Anything else?”

“Not as much a rule, as a bit of advice – Abhik wanted to play this game. He got you drunk and you went for it and then he challenged you. He chose the board; he made the rules. He’ll have done his prep, checked up on your resources. He’ll be watching your known contacts, waiting for you to run to them for help.”

“I guessed as much already.”

“Sobering up?”

“What time is it?”

“Quarter to twelve.”

“Where do I start?”

“Here.”

“And Abhik?”

“The Gameshouse.”

“That’s only twenty minutes away.”

“Twenty minutes on foot,” corrected Silver. “Five by car.”

“Five minutes head start isn’t much.”

“Bangkok is big, and you were drunk.” Then a question, fast, pushing its way through Silver’s lips, the thing he had wanted to ask and had fought, and now which demanded to be known. “Why does Abhik want to play you, Remy?” he asked. “This game smacks of the personal. What did you do to him?”

“Honestly, old thing,” replied Remy, pulling a bag down from the top of the wardrobe, “I have no idea.”

Chapter 4

We watch.

We watch Silver slip away round the back of the hotel at five minutes to noon. The game has not yet commenced – that comes with the ringing of the bell – but it is bad form, bad manners, for one player to be seen helping another too particularly. It might raise questions in the house about what that other player really intends.

We see Abhik Lee pacing up and down before the silver doors of the Gameshouse. How did this house come to be here? We have seen these doors in Venice and London, Paris and New York, Tokyo and Beijing, always the same doors with the lion's head roaring from the metalwork, and yet wherever it is, wherever it appears, the Gameshouse seems old, a fixture, slotting into the architecture of this place as if it always was, and vanishing again without a scar.

We ask ourselves, you and I, who controls this motion through the world? Who is it who proclaims that here, now, in 1938, a door to the house shall open in Bangkok?

Then we ask ourselves another, far harder question: why?

Abhik Lee asks no such matter. He is a higher-league player of the Gameshouse. He has only one objective, the same as commands every man and woman who has ever set foot in those hallowed halls: he is determined to win. Every other thought is merely a distraction.

Observe Abhik Lee for a minute. His heritage is all mixed up. Persian, Bengali and Nepalese met a few generations ago with a Scottish sergeant from the East India Company, who fell in love with India, shaved his beard and swore never to eat meat again, and whose grandchildren were more beautiful than any in the village, black-haired and green-eyed, and who were shunned for being strange. Abhik was shunned too, but he stumbled through the doors of the Gameshouse where the white-robed umpires were waiting for him, and there he discovered that a skill at cards could bring more than

passing glories.

Smart grey suit and smart black shoes, cut in London, perhaps, or Paris – he must be hot in all that wool, we muse, but he is never out of it, never seen with a crease in his shirt or a smudge on his trousers, for now that Abhik has these things that other men desire, he will not be seen without. Abhik Lee will change for dinner in the Sahara, wear sock suspenders in the Taklamakan, because he can and because you cannot. He has seen the election posters in Bangkok and heard the winds of change, whispers of Japanese troops eyeing nearby Singapore, of army generals who no longer care what the once sacred king believed – and he doesn't care. These are merely the unfolding events of history around his life, and history will pass while he endures.

His watch has a silver case, and never loses time.

It strikes noon, and the hunt begins.

Chapter 5

Bangkok was built when a capital city was destroyed. Ayutthaya, cultivated city of noble kings, burned to the ground, the royal family butchered or taken as slaves. When that city died, a tradition began of generals taking power where no better alternative arose, and the offspring of those generals now sat, uncomfortable and quiet in the great palace of Bangkok, while new generals gave new orders, bowing to the kings who had to remember not to bow in return.

At some time, a palace was built on a swamp, its houses, shops and warehouses little better than floating wharves, rafts that bobbed against that uneven muddy shore where water and land could not decide which was the mightier. But though a young city, she had grown fast, and now sprawled away from the Chao Phraya river inland, criss-crossed by brown canals where the mosquitoes swarmed. The streets of Bangkok were as strange a medley of societies as ever grew on any corner of the earth. Shacks of tottering wood; longboats rotting at the seams; great embassies and European mansions of shining stone topped with tiny ramparts as if the inhabitants feared an assault by toy men, or feared so little the men of Thailand that even in defending against them, they made them dwarves. Temples – the great stone wats – none more than a century and a half old, yet within ancient carvings and stern lessons had been dragged from across the country to give an age to all things which the erosive action of damp and sun had not quite yet achieved. But even within these newly raised Buddhist shrines could be found the cackling green of long-tongued Kali dancing on the skulls of her enemies; the smiling hand of Krishna, the many arms of Vishnu; and scholars of theology debated furiously in Hindi, Thai, Malay and Mandarin which the most righteous path to heaven might be, while from their embassies and wharves the Christian men and women of the West looked on in wonder and marvelled that anything so beautiful could be so wrong.

Into this city as the clocks struck noon tumbles Remy Burke, hungover,

bewildered, a bag upon his back containing one pair of pants, two pairs of socks, a box of matches, a stub of candle, two hundred baht in various pieces, a pencil and a knife. In any city in the world, such a man might cause some remark, and now such remarks were death or as near to death as ever he could imagine.

Had he bet his *memories*?

Such bets were not unheard of in the Gameshouse, and he had no reason to doubt Silver's word. Should the umpires have not intervened? Should someone not have stopped him? (Games are not always fair.)

Too late to wonder now.

He runs.

Chapter 6

Only three ways out of Bangkok. Train, boat or road. Each has their disadvantage.

Alternative?

Stay in Bangkok.

Hide out in an embassy with foreigners like himself?

But no. Too obvious: the embassy would become a trap, a prison; he'd be found, he had no doubt, Abhik catching him within a few days, a week at most. He needed to get into the country, find a forest or a mountain, keep moving.

No time to stop and think it through. Dammit! No time.

Train, boat or road?

He was less than a mile from the central station, and from there to anywhere, the growing tendrils of Siam's railways spreading out before him, but it was obvious, easy, the trains infrequent and unreliable. There existed no real timetable, only a blackboard with departures scrawled up by a grinning man in a crooked cap, a promise of good intentions rather than a guarantee of escape.

Or perhaps he'd get lucky. Perhaps there'd be a train.

Road?

Cars are still rare, the property of the very rich; better to steal a bicycle.

A six-foot-two Frenchman on a bicycle peddling through the fields of Thailand might still excite some remark; but that's a problem he'll have wherever he goes, whatever he does.

Oh, he has been played, has Remy Burke! He has been played long before this game began.

He makes a decision, the middle way, and runs for the river.

Hey hey! Let us stand a moment together you and I on the banks of the Chao Phraya and listen to the calls, hey hey! You want something, sir, you want to

buy? Here, I have gold, silver, gems, totems of sacred power; I have herbs, spices, rice wrapped in banana leaves, locusts deep-fried, very good, very tasty, sparrows on a skewer you can eat whole, prawns bigger than your fist, hey hey! Slow down, sir, slow down, it's very good, you're foreign, yes, you're rich, yes, you've come to the East to taste something wonderful: try this, buy this, buy her, buy him; come sir, come! The floating market is always here, a hundred little rafts and boats, a dozen great steamers, a handful of clippers that wormed their way up from the bay to the south: we are here, all of us, waiting for you, as you have waited for us, gold flowing along the Chao Phraya river.

Remy does not buy.

He has fifty baht in his bag and the clothes he wears. Every satang now counts; every grubby coin and haggled bargain. He runs, breathless and sweaty, the air a humid cloak that smothers the skin, faces turning in amazement at this gasping stranger, for who runs in Thailand? *Keep a cool heart*, tut the old men in the doorways. *Be happy and keep your heart cool.*

In other times he loved this country for its immersion in relaxation. The sun is too hot, the people seem to say, the ground too wet, the mountains too high, the rice too green for stress, so be calm, wind down, the train will leave when the train feels like it, the tide will turn when the river is ready so why do you pant and stamp your foot?

He stamps his foot because he will die, his mind will die, if you do not get out of his way!

The waterside. The river has not yet been fully tamed; it still carries memories of those good old days when the city floated on top of it, and only the Grand Palace stood in its way. In Ratanakosin, the kings of this land built stone walls to protect their homes, their vaults, their stolen emerald Buddhas, but away from those fine places of gilt and gold, wooden wharves, sticking out into the water like dead leopard tongues, are man's greatest incursion against waves. The sea is to the south, but there is too much danger of hitting international waters, of breaking the rules, and if Remy fears one thing more than defeat, he fears the umpires, white-robed and unrelenting, who find their prey in any place. Now the gnats buzz over the edge of the water, the flies cling to the empty sockets of the dead fish laid out for sale, the easy-time girls coo at the foreign buyers and sellers come to port, at the neat Japanese who sniff and tut and head to a more important meeting with more important

men; at the wandering Chinese, thrown by war and politics from their own country to seek new meaning in new places; at the Malay labourers looking for a taste of freedom; and the Anglo-Indian scholars who have lived long enough to wonder what "freedom" even means. They come, they all come, to the market, and so does Remy, praying that in this crowd even he, ridiculous-looking he, will not stand out.

"Nakhon Sawan! I am going towards Nakhon Sawan!" He addresses the boatsmen in Thai, but they laugh at his flushed face, panting breath.

"Take the train, Frenchman!" advises one, casually throwing barrels of silver fish over the side. "You'll like the train!"

"I want to go by boat."

"Why? It'll take much longer, you look in a hurry."

"I like the river."

"Take the train, French! It's much better for you!"

So rejected, he looked at his watch.

Twenty past twelve.

What would he do if he was Abhik Lee?

He would raid the hotel, hoping to catch Remy with his pants down, certainly. But he'd also send pieces to the station, set watchers on the roads, set a cordon round Ratanakosin, and of course – but of course – he'd send pieces to the waterfront. Not as many, perhaps, as he'd put on the trains, but still enough that he could be spotted. How long would it take? If he was lucky, Abhik would have sent too few people to apprehend him immediately; or perhaps not? Perhaps Abhik's hand is that good, every piece he plays a master of muay boran, every one a killer.

He looked along the shore and saw no one obvious, no one staring at him too hard, too long, but then again on this waterside, this teaming waterside of barrels and crates, of bartering and discord, *he* is the most obvious thing about it. Poor Remy Burke, the most obvious man in Thailand.

(He looks, and does not see, but that does not mean that his enemies are not already there for lo! we spot the woman that his eyes skim over, her hair blue-black, her eyes laughing, seemingly at the antics of a group of children who prod a still-crawling crab with sticks along the quay, but who sold her soul to the Gameshouse when she was just fourteen years old, bartering away her freedom to save her baby's life, and who now is a piece in someone else's hand.

She smiles to see the children play, and turns from the waterfront to send a skinny boy on a bicycle to the train station to summon up more men.)

A boatman unloads barrels of still-living snakes. He harvested them from the swamps to the east, great tangled masses of red, black, brown and green that snap at each other as they are hooked on the end of a pole. His four-year-old daughter sits in the front of his barge playing with a tiny one that has taken a particular fancy to the twist of her wrist, before her brother, ten and all grown up, pulls it by its gaping jaw and tosses it with the rest of its kin, condemned to a culinary destination or a medical fate.

On the pier, the wife haggles. Her arms are lightly pocked with a dozen snake bites which she brushes off now as easy as a fly. Her clothes are not so much worn as wrapped all about her, great twists and barrels of cloth in faded blue and brown, spun around her chest, her waist, her head, her feet, and we can feel perhaps a moment of sympathy for the man who is on the receiving end of her tongue, as forked as her cargo, sympathetic as a fang.

“No!” she proclaims. “No, no! You pay the price we agreed or we go elsewhere!”

“Where will you go?” demands the buyer. “Where will you go? This is an inferior cargo!”

“It is not inferior: it is exactly what we agreed; you pay what we agreed…”

As they row, Remy eyes the boat. He kneels down by its prow, smiles at the boy, who glares like a man. “You came down Chao Phraya?” he asks softly.

The boy nods, shoulders back, chest puffed; a little warrior.

“You know Nakhon Sawan?”

“Hey! You want to buy snakes?” The father steps forward, boat bouncing unevenly. “I can sell you snakes, good for you to eat them, good for the heart, good for being a man! My wife handles all the money things.”

“Are you going north?” asks Remy. “Towards Nakhon?”

“Yes, north – but not all the way. The people aren’t so good there.”

“But out of the city?”

“Yes – you want to come?”

“I do.”

The husband runs his tongue around the inside of his lips, looking Remy over. “I’ll talk to my wife,” he says.

“Could we leave immediately?”

“Once we’ve unloaded snakes!”

The wife is there quickly, a tiny woman cowing all before her, glaring up into Remy’s face. “Where do you want to go?” she demands in rata-tat-tat Thai straight from the front lines.

“North. Out of the city.”

“Why?”

“Honestly, ma’am – I made a bet and now I need to get away.”

She sucks in her breath, long and slow, clicks her tongue, looks at her children, her husband, her barrel full of snakes. “Five baht!”

A fortune – a veritable fortune! He can pay it a hundred times over in the normal way of things, but this is not the normal way of things. “Three baht.”

“Five!”

“Three, ma’am. There are many boats which would take me further for three.”

Her eyes wander across the wharves, assessing her potential rivals, hungry for profit. “We aren’t going to Nakhon.”

“But you are leaving the city?”

“Three baht…you are a villain, but three!”

He smiles.

“Let me help you unload.”

Chapter 7

We watch the boat slip away from the land.

We are not the only ones.

Four minutes after it has reached the centre of the stream, knocking against the sneaking currents of the river, three cars arrive. Three are two more than are usually seen in Bangkok, save when the king or the generals go about their business, but there they are, black, American-made, carried over the Pacific by a great white-painted steamer, decks scrubbed and windows clean, which will be sunk in four years' time by a German U-Boat prowling the shipping lanes for arms and men. We are impressed that Abhik Lee has such good cars ready to do his work, but then we remember – he has been planning this for a long time, hasn't he? Nothing is chance in the Gameshouse.

Abhik Lee steps onto the quay, shields his eyes against the glare of the high-noon sun, squints against the river. Thinks, perhaps, that he sees the shape of Remy Burke, huddling low but still clear, against the side of the little rocking boat. Seeing is not enough – he must tag his target.

"Get on the water," he barks to the men from one car, and then to the other, "Get ahead along the river. Don't lose sight of the boat."

How close he is! He can win this in a day, perhaps. What a glorious victory that would be.

Two hours later, a police boat pulls alongside the little barge of empty barrels and shed snake skins. The officers scream at the family to obey, to stop, where is the foreigner?

The husband clings to his oar; the little boy cries.

The wife stands in the middle of the boat, arms flapping, tongue lashing like rigging in a storm, proclaiming you pigs, you dogs, you come here, you speak to us like this, how dare you, how dare you, look at what you people have become!

Abhik Lee leans forward on the railing of the police boat.

“Ma’am.” His voice is quiet, courteous, unstoppable. “Where is the foreigner?”

The foreigner paid three baht to be taken north, but handed over only two and they hadn’t travelled more than a mile before, without explanation, he demanded to be rowed to the easterly bank of the river, and hopped overboard.

“How long ago was this?” sighs Abhik Lee.

“About an hour! He didn’t even say thank you!”

Abhik Lee’s face contorts briefly in a scowl, which vanishes as quickly as it blooms. He at least is courteous, always so very courteous. Lose courtesy, and you lose control; lose control and you lose yourself.

Shall we peek?

Oh, go on then.

Let’s look at the cards in Abhik’s hand.

We ease open his jacket pocket, slip our fingers down towards the silver cigarette case where he so discreetly stashed them, slide it out while he is otherwise occupied and flick through the papers.

My – my, oh my! What a hand was here dealt!

Police inspectors, spies domestic and foreign, a communist saboteur, chiefs of little villages where surely the Gameshouse should not have reached (and yet how far it goes), two abbots and a nun, an anarchist rumoured to have planted a Malaysian bomb or two, a criminal overlord and his son, two majors, three industrialists, one colonel and a general! With cards like these, you could stage a coup, topple a king, start a war! These are extraordinary cards you have been dealt, Abhik Lee, and for what?

To hunt a single man, alone and hungover, through the rivers of Thailand?

We slip the cards back into Abhik’s pocket, our presence unknown, our thoughts unexpressed. We are the watchers that take no part, the umpires that judge all but can never be judged. We play the players.

Run, Remy Burke. Run.

Chapter 8

For seven hours, they hunt high, they hunt low.

Abhik Lee plays three cards fast. A policeman stops all trains leaving the central station, saying a murderer is here, searches every compartment of every truck. The passengers sit around on their suitcases and bundles, chins in their hands, waiting until at last, five hours after the first train to the north should have gone, Abhik says, “Enough,” and the policemen lets them go, pumping great black clouds from the stacks of the engine and creaking slow over the too-quickly rusted tracks as they head away from the city.

A colonel sets up roadblocks on the main roads from the city. There was a threat against the king, he explains, a foreigner with a gun, and now everyone must be stopped and checked. The French ambassador and his mistress were heading out into the countryside for a few days of light hand-holding and poetry-making (as some might put it) and, since they are foreign and heading away, they are stopped and held at gunpoint while the colonel examines their papers, their faces, their lives. The French ambassador threatens gunboats and retribution, not so much in indignation at his condition, but in terror of his wife finding out, when word trickles back to the embassy, of just who he was with when so slandered.

The colonel examines the ambassador and says, “No – it’s not him,” and lets him go.

On the river, the police boat chugs up and down. Its highest speed is eight knots, but on the Chao Phraya that is something almost extraordinary, and the boatmen tut and shake their heads as the police churn by, exclaiming, “In such a hurry! These busy people and their crimes, so stressful, so much stress!”

By the time the sun is down and the mosquitoes are out, Abhik Lee is very quiet and very calm.

“It’s fine,” he says. “A quick capture would have been ideal, but we are prepared for the long game. Let him run; let him hide. We’ll have him within

the week.”

This said, he goes directly to the telegraph office and begins to raise his forces through the rest of the country.

Chapter 9

Darkness settles.

We settle with it.

So still, so quiet. We – you and I – we are so used to the bright lights of the city, to the sky flecked with the reflection of our business, but here, in this time and in this place, all is darkness, all is quiet. The roads of Siam are peopled by day with trudging barefoot men and baby-swaddled mothers; with skipping children, ear-flicking donkeys, ponies and their traps and even, if you head far enough from the city, the occasional slow-marching elephant and his rider, hauling great logs of timber or pallets of clay to their destinations. There are cars, surely, and trucks too, but they are few and far between, and we may stand now, you and I, and turn our faces towards the stars and see an infinity of light that shines in the heavens, but not, we think, upon the earth. Dao Look Kai, the seven little chickens that threw themselves into the fire where their mother burnt, a tiny cluster of starlight that we might call the Pleiades. The crocodile, Dao Ja Ra Kae, look on him and remember always to do good deeds so you will be rewarded. Dao Jone, the brightest star of all. Children born under his light will become robbers, and the dogs that would have guarded the house all fall asleep under his silver gaze.

Stop.

Listen.

A van approaches! Most rare sight, a Russian-built thing, perhaps? No – not Russian. A British van come up from India, a tarpaulin upon its back, crates bouncing with the light rattle of green celadon pottery, delicate cups and narrow-lipped vases which are gently going out of fashion as the spread of the West to the East begins to overwhelm the once fashionable spread of the East to the West.

This van stutters along a nowhere road in a nowhere place, the driver sucking a fat cheroot which he has savoured for nearly thirty miles, leafy ash dripping onto his trousers when – bang! An axel cracks, a tyre bursts,

something shifts in the back of the vehicle which should not, but he only rolls his eyes and slows to a halt, for this has happened before to him and will happen again for the coming fifteen years in which he will continue to drive this van until that fateful day when the engine bursts past all repair and too far from replacements.

Cursing all the way, the man steps from his driver's seat and, feeling his way in the star-black darkness to the back of the van, throws back the tarpaulin.

The light is faint, the moon a thin crescent behind skudding clouds, but it is enough: as he pulls back the covers from his crates, he sees a man, and the man sees him.

The driver jumps back, a faint cry coming from his throat, not sure whether to run or fight.

The man hidden at the back of his truck raises his hands imploringly, calls out, "Please, no – I'm not going to hurt you!"

"You're right you're not going to hurt me!" retorts the driver. "This is my van – what are you doing?!"

"I needed a lift."

"Haven't you heard of asking? Why are you hiding at the back of my van?!"

"I thought there might be roadblocks."

"Roadblocks? Are you a criminal? If you are a criminal then you should know that I will die to defend my property!"

This statement, coming as it did from a potter's son whose nearest equivalent to martial prowess was the time he was beaten up by Sunan for looking funny at Sunan's sister, is perhaps louder and more indignantly rendered than it needs to be.

Remy untangled himself from the tarpaulin, slipping uneasily to the ground, hands still raised in a placating way, fingers open, palms turned towards the driver. "I just needed a lift," he murmured, eyes running across the empty land, flat fields, flat mud, low trees, darkness. "Where are we?"

"Where are we? *Where are we?!* You hide in my van, you scare me half to death and then you ask, 'Where are we?' We are in hell, foreigner! I have driven you straight to hell and there is no escape from it!"

Remy turned his attention fully to this bouncing, indignant doomsayer, and straightening up a little, said, "In that case, I'll leave you to it."

Slinging his bag across his shoulder, he looked back the way they'd come, then on towards the dark, and with a little shaking of his head and a shifting of his weight, turned and began to walk.

The road was packed mud; the night hummed with insects.

His trousers were muddy from jumping too quickly from the snake-seller's barge. What had he seen that had frightened him?

(He had seen three cars pull up to the riverbank as they sailed away and known that three was three too many. You may be hungover, Remy, but you did not enter the higher league for nothing.)

He had hidden in the pottery man's truck because it was going the right way at the right time. They'd taken a back road out of the city so that the potter could say goodbye to his second-favourite aunt, the one who always gave him something sweet mashed with coconut, and in this familial manner had dodged the roadblocks.

Remy hadn't eaten all day, or had anything to drink.

His stomach contracted in tight physical pain at the recollection, but he shook his head: he cannot stop; a stranger in a familiar land, he must not stop.

Behind, the driver of the van flaps and curses and, when the darkness has swallowed Remy whole, stands still and shakes, chewing his bottom lip though he cannot say why.

Five miles later, the fixed truck chugged by Remy on the road, the headlights dimly illuminating him. They swept past a few hundred yards, then stopped. Remy sighed and kept walking. The passenger door opened, the driver stuck his head out.

"Hey!"

"What do you want?"

"You want a lift?"

Remy stopped, turned on the muddy road to look up into the dimly-lit face within. "What?"

"A lift! You want a lift?"

Hunger bites, thirst sucks.

"Yes," he said, climbing inside. "That would be very kind."

Chapter 10

The driver's name was Looknam.

Rather, his name was Kalayanaphan Angthongkul Somboon, but as a child his mother found him a mewling, difficult boy and so named him for the larvae of the maggot, and called him Looknam, and for reasons of speed as much as anything else, Looknam he remained. For four years as a child he barely made a sound except for crying, but aged six some switch was flipped in Looknam's soul and from a creature of few words he became near impossible to silence, speaking both volumes and – worse – tactless, honest volumes of words where none would have been preferable. By the age of twenty he'd achieved the remarkable accolade of having lost four jobs in fewer years, and at twenty-one he was finally given to his uncle by his despairing mother in the hope that the wealthier potter could find some use for his garrulous nephew.

Rather unkindly, that use was driving the truck.

"I think my mother thought that it might make me quieter, a better man, you know, having no one to talk to? I drive thousands of miles every week; I go to Rangoon to sell to the British or Vientiane to sell to the French; and I pick up the clay on my way back south and my uncle says that one day I might be allowed to do something else, like sell things instead of deliver them, but I don't mind: I like driving; it's relaxing, and my friend Gop says that everyone's hoping I'll drive off a cliff or get stuck in a river or something somewhere, because the truck wasn't really built to do all this hauling over such distances and it would make more sense to put the pottery on a boat and sell directly to India but I say that we've got family in Rangoon and they buy at a really good price because you know the people who come to that city to trade, well, they're really stupid, much more stupid than in Bangkok so it's good that we can sell there and if I'm the only one driving the truck then it's not so expensive and in Bangkok people know what good pottery really is so we can't sell this stuff – I mean, it's not bad, but it's not

great; actually it's not very good at all, but the Chinese used to make better stuff but that market dried up, my sister says, so maybe it's okay really, but anyway, like I said, I don't mind driving: I enjoy the quiet."

Silence, for a few seconds.

"Also I like picking up people; there are people going places in this country; this is a moving country ever since the generals stepped in and I know that people talk about how it's not a good thing, and that the king is in danger and we have to protect the king but I say how's the king in danger? These are his generals doing the best for his country and I know there was some…but it's all settled down now and we're all going to be fine really, as long as the Japanese don't invade which they won't because why would they? They're not interested in us, just the British, really, just Singapore and India and that's fine, really, although the Japanese are almost as bad as the Europeans but if they don't bother us who cares?"

Who did care?

Not Remy, it seemed.

"But one day I'll stop driving and meet a woman and we'll get married and have five children – three girls and two boys, but the boys will be the oldest and protect their little sisters and the youngest girl will be my favourite, not that I'll have favourites but I will really because, well, we do, don't we, and she'll be very shy until one day when she starts singing and then everyone will say how brilliant she is at singing and she'll become the most famous of them all – not the richest: the boys will be rich, and they'll look after me and my wife in our old age – but my daughters will all be famous and all take it in turns to come and feed us when they're not travelling the world performing."

Silence.

"What do you think?"

Silence.

Remy sucked in the side of his cheek, feeling the soft tissue with the tip of his tongue, exploring the interior of his mouth carefully as if seeking out unwise sentiments that might have lodged between his teeth. "I think it sounds very pleasant."

Silence.

Then, "Do you want a cheroot? I pick them up in Rangoon, much better – *much* better! – than what you get here, cheaper too, everything cheaper."

A cigar, wrapped in grey-green leaves, fatter almost than his wrist, was offered. “Thank you, no.”

“Mind if I…?”

“Not at all. As you say, it’s your truck.”

“My truck, yes! Can’t believe you hid in it; I would have given you a lift if you’d asked; what is it – law trouble? Don’t worry about it, everyone’s had trouble with the law before, it happens; you know a lot of criminals go into the monasteries now? I mean, I’m in favour, whatever the monks do I’m sure it’s good, but I don’t know, some take the robes and I’m sure they get better but some, some are just – well! You know what some are like, don’t you? But I’d never say anything, I’m sure, because it’s not my business, just make merit and pray for good karma, that’s what you do, isn’t it? Do you pray?”

“No.”

“You should pray, you should pray, it’s very important, even if you don’t pray to the right things you must pray, you must make offerings otherwise you’ll never have any hope; it’s the law, the law of the universe – are you sure you don’t want a smoke?”

“Thank you – no.”

Looknam shrugged. “More for me!” he exclaimed merrily, and chatted on as they drove through the dark.

Chapter 11

The village lay on the water.

Those words could be spoken about most places in lowland Siam, and therefore as geographical descriptors went, they meant nothing at all.

Remy slept in the back of the truck while Loknoom snored in the front. Dawn came in reflective grey streaks, bouncing off the still water of the lake. Remy woke with the cawing of the crows, knelt in the mud and washed his face, drank a handful of water down, felt hunger in his belly, fear at his back, looked around at a four-house town, Loknoom's truck the only vehicle in sight; knew he could not stay.

"I'll take you to Rangoon! I've got a cousin there, his wife – you should see his wife …"

"I can't leave this country."

"Why not? You're foreign – you can go wherever you want!"

"Not today I can't. Thank you for the lift."

"Where will you go? There's nothing round here!"

Remy shrugged, and walked away.

Impressions of a man on the run.

He has forty-eight baht in his bag. What was that worth? A month's rent for a small room in the city – if he didn't eat. A couple of journeys by train. One night of drinking at the French club in Bangkok. A gun and a few bullets. A few weeks' food and drink, carefully measured. Not enough – not nearly enough.

Dawn rises to the day. The day is hot. In February, the locals call it mild and luxuriate in the sun; which turns Remy's skin lobster-pink as he boils. In May, even the oil-skinned men who hunt snakes on the water confess it too hot to work after 9 a.m., and sit and wait for the rains. It is April. It is the worst of times to get sunburnt.

He steals fruit from the trees and eats in an explosion of juices and sugars.

He tries to steal a chicken, but it's too fast for him and he lands on his face.

He walks for five hours without seeing a car, a bicycle, a truck or another village.

The only people he sees are two farmers, their trousers rolled above their ankles, wide hats upon their heads, leading three heavy-limbed buffalo to a field. They stare at him, openly amazed, perhaps the first foreigner they have ever set eyes on, but he puts his hands together in a greeting and is careful to bow lower than they do, for this is their land, their fields, and he is a stranger trespassing on their roads.

He stops shortly after midday, sweating, still hungry despite his stolen fruit, thirsty enough to risk climbing through flooded fields, drinking from water that he has no doubt contains its fair share of leeches and snakes. He must survive off this land, he knows, since he hasn't the resources to live by any other means, and to do so first he must stop fearing it.

After an hour, he carries on walking, his head now pounding, not from alcohol – though that ill-fated start to the journey did not help – but heat and hunger. He cannot say after a while if it's the sun that moves about the earth, or he who moves about the sun; cannot swear that he isn't walking in circles, chasing sunset. It isn't until the sky is turning orange and pink on the horizon and the glare has gone from his gummy eyes that he comes to another village, a cluster of houses roofed with dried leaves spread across a wooden frame, whose adults stare at him as if he were a walking ghost, and whose children, knowing no better, flock around him in fascination, too shy to ask questions, too curious to run away.

An old man approaches. He is almost as thin and fibrous as the stick on which he leans, skin like bark, hair like cobweb. He is the village elder but unlike his father, who was the elder before him, he has retained his wits and knows better than to glare with suspicion on the unknown.

"Who are you?" he asks. "Are you lost?"

"A traveller," Remy replies. "Not lost; just wandering."

Ah! Revelation dawns in the elder's face, for he knows, though he has never met anyone like this before, that foreigners go very easily mad in hot climates, and here clearly is a deluded poor fool struck down by too much sun.

"Come inside, come into the shade," he commands. "Eat with us, eat!"

Remy obeys.

Chapter 12

Remy ate rice in the shade.

Took off his boots.

Rubbed the blisters, put his boots back on before he could scratch them until they burst.

Found a leech feeding busily against his calf.

Knocked it carefully off. Do not pinch it at the back, or squeeze too hard. Do not scald it with fire or salt. These remedies, though traditional, make the leech regurgitate its meal, filling a wound with its stomach. Ease it off gently – so gently – or let it gorge until it flops to the ground, the anaesthetic of its saliva numbing the bite.

The villages watched him silently, asking nothing until, when her father's back was turned, the daughter of the house lent forward and said:

"Is it nice in the city? Is there a lot to do?"

Remy opened his mouth to reply, and found that only banalities or shallow half-truths were willing to manifest. A longer, more honest reply would have required more energy than he had.

"It's all right," he said, "as these things go."

When he tried to sleep, the elder's wife came over to him, offering a bag of what seemed to be powdered white chalk. He didn't understand, and she demonstrated, rubbing it into her face, her arms, her legs, her hands, until every exposed part of her seemed to become a ghost, an eager, grinning ghost, offering her gift to him. He cautiously rubbed some on his face, and found it cooling. She nodded and smiled, encouraging him as you might encourage a frightened child.

He lay down on the wooden floor of the elder's house, and slept without being invited, and without being disturbed.

He slept for five hours.

The sound of engines woke him.

A terror in the night, a dread of discovery. He sat straight awake, saw the sweep of headlights across the roof of the hut, crawled on hands and knees to the window, peeped out.

Already the people of the village were gathering, curious, if not particularly surprised, for first a foreigner had come, and now this car: these things were most certainly connected, and most certainly unremarkable in being so.

A man steps from the car; then another; then a third.

They are smartly dressed. One is Thai, another Japanese, the third is of that wondrous medley of bloods that has no real place to call its own, but is of everywhere in the world. Abhik Lee, you could have been beautiful if you were not such a player.

The elder of that place greets them, points them towards his house.

They run inside, but Remy Burke had slept with his boots on and is not to be seen.

Chapter 13

A miserable sunrise.

He crawls in the night through mud and field, and at daybreak looks back to see the clear path of destruction his journey has sown through that tranquil land. Torn stalks, broken flowers, fallen purple petals and uprooted wild celery mark the path he has taken, and the village is still visible behind him, his way clouded by darkness. His feet are sodden, threatening to rot inside his boots; he shivers though the air is growing hot.

He cannot use the roads – not now, not with Abhik so close. The hunter moved fast, so fast! He saw that his prey had escaped Bangkok and must have followed the roads, sending out tendrils to ask where a stranger had been seen. Remy needs to change his face, and soon, but there has been no time, so fast the chase follows.

He staggers, back bent and lungs gasping, through the rising day.

A car swerves by on a nearby road. He hadn't even seen the road; it was a thing lost behind the bushes, just a path of mud carved through more mud still. He hides, belly-down among the thin green shoots of the field, until it has passed. A pair of water buffalo eye him suspiciously, not sure what this walking puddle is doing in their kingdom. His appearance will be a problem, he knows. If there is anything more distinctive than a six-foot-tall Anglo-Frenchman walking alone through the lowlands of Siam, it is a six-foot-tall Anglo-Frenchman who is covered in mud. Such an appearance is not the colonial way, and Bulldog Britain or La Belle France would be most displeased to know that one of their native sons was so dishonouring their noble ways as to appear…dishevelled. Uncouth. Inferior. There is no mud, the ambassador might proclaim, in noble England. Even the beggars are hungry for better things.

He knows that he cannot keep running like this for long. What would he do if he were the seeker?

He'd set up a cordon, the radius of a running man's reach, let nothing in

and nothing out. Setting up such a cordon around Bangkok was a challenge, the city too big; out here in the countryside, with two roads in and one road out, it is not so hard to do.

At noon he hid in the shade of the matum tree. Grey fruits, not yet ripe, swayed in the branches overhead. A bird with a shaven head and extravagant tail feathers stared down at him, and cacked its displeasure at his presence for a while before losing interest and returning to the task of preening.

He set his eyes on a range of low hills in the distance. The sun had burnt all the clouds away, and they seemed bare and harsh in this hot noontime light. As he neared, he could see the beginning of forest and scrub clinging to the low rise, green-grey leaves, spiny and broad, as if the palm trees of the south and the hardy evergreens of the north had met in this country and fused together in ultimate genetic victory.

The path became harder as he neared the hills. The pain in his feet had reduced to steady throbbing; the throbbing was not good news. The aching in his head whispered of heatstroke yet to come, but he couldn’t waste time on puking, not now, not when Abhik was so close behind.

At some hour of the early afternoon, he heard the sound of an engine, louder and clearer than even the cars that had sometime rattled across this mud-shaped land. He ran until he reached scrubby bushes which rose to his waist, threw himself down in their embrace, twigs snapping at his skin, a startled rodent racing from its lair. There he stayed as the engine noise circled once, then twice, then a third time overhead. His clothes were the colour of grey mud, his hair, his skin, all things caked in dirt, and that was probably what saved him.

The plane turned and turned again, then flew on by, its spotters having seen nothing to report.

He reached the edge of the low forest by dusk. The last few miles had been the longest, paths running out, fields growing to tumbled-over towers of tortured foliage. He fell beneath the shade of an acacia tree, heard the shrill night callings of the beautiful creatures that paraded through the day, their feathers vibrant golds and greens, their voices like the battle-cry of a barbarian granny, and for a few blissful minutes, Remy slept.

The night was all about compensating for the day.

He puked what meagre contents were in his stomach, then puked thin, white bile.

He lay curled up in a ball, head pounding, arms shaking, his blanket a bundle of freshly fallen leaves, his skin twitching from the landings and departing of myriad flies. In the dark he thought he heard something large, panting, stir in the woods, and wondered whether tigers ever came this close to humanity, or if wild dogs slumbered. It would be simple to light a fire – but not yet. Not tonight. Not with Abhik's men so close by.

Shortly after midnight, by the rising of the moon, he heard voices in the distant forest. Sound travelled strangely in this place, carried on the leaf-rustling wind. He pulled his bed of leaves higher above his head until barely his eyes showed between their damp edges, and watched distant flashes of torchlight play in the woods before fading away with the sounds of men.

Abhik Lee had a tracker; of course he did.

It would have been foolish to expect anything else.

Chapter 14

He rose with the sun, having no alternative.

A wild boar, furious and panting, sprang away from his den as he shook himself free, startled to discover that it had spent a part of the night near a creature bigger than itself. He wondered if anyone else would hear the commotion of that passing beast.

As the sun climbed higher, so did he. Beneath a fallen tree trunk, he found a nest of nameless scuttling insects and collected a handful in a scoop of leaf to serve as breakfast. Hunger made them taste better; perhaps even good. The ones with long antennae about their head and little spots of brown across their carapace reminded him a little of prawns.

A dip in the land hinted at water but the stream he found at its centre was barely an arm wide, a running trickle of nothing. He buried himself in it, turning his head against the flow to let the water run across his face, his eyes, into his mouth. He didn't dare take his boots off for fear that his swollen feet would never get back inside.

He wondered if he should stay here by this little stream, eating little insects, but looking back the way he had come, he could see too easily the muddy imprints where he had walked, the broken twigs he had snapped, the undergrowth disturbed, and so he kept climbing.

The shadow of the forest made moving easier, sheltered from the heat of the sun, but made navigating harder. He climbed, trusting only to motion, until he came to a ridge of spindly grey stones which rose above the top of the highest trees, and there, feeling his way along in search of an easy route, he found a path, narrower than a child's waist but still distinctly a thing carved out with knives and boots, which snaked over the ridge of the hill and ran down the other side.

He followed it a while until he came to a tiny fork, a bare disturbance in the way, and seeing it had already been disturbed by other feet before his, followed that.

It curled a little down the way he had come, and he was almost ready to leave it when, pushing through an insect-crawling shrub, he came to a small clearing. Here, from a nondescript pile of grey rocks, the little stream rose where he'd earlier drunk, and there, carved in the same stone and decked with yellow and green lichens, were the faces of a dozen gods.

Tallest among them, though a little shorter than Remy, was the smiling, beatific Gautama, his hair held high and his ears hanging long, hands together in a *wai* of greetings. Either side, smaller but no less worn or carefully carved, he glimpsed Vishnu and Krishna, Ganesh the elephant god and Kuanyin, goddess of mercy, standing together like a happy family, and in one corner, an arm sadly chipped off at the elbow, another saint with Indian features and a Buddhist robe, who wore about his neck the sign of the cross and smiled as contentedly as any on this hill.

A woman sat before these icons. She squatted on her haunches, picking at a ravaged piece of fruit, her eyes wandering over the statues with no particular focus on any one divinity. Her head was wrapped in bright fabrics that swept back to a point; her neck was circled with metal bands that pushed her chin up high above her shoulders. Her teeth were stained black and red with betel juice, her wrists were skinny and old, her ankles narrow enough he could have wrapped his thumb and little finger around them and still had room to clench. At his approach her head turned up, revealing her stained smile, film-coated eyes. She squinted through the pinprick vision of her cataracts, saw a stranger, a shape without distinction, and grunted a sound which might have been greeting, might have been contempt. She couldn't have been a day under seventy, yet somehow she'd made her way up here to eat fruit and rock back and forth before these ancient stones.

Remy bowed, palms pressed together, asked her, "Excuse me, revered lady, do you know if there is somewhere I can trade for food around here?"

She took so long to answer, he began to speak again, but she cut him off with a shaking of her head and a shifting of her weight from one foot to the other.

"Trade, trade, nothing to trade," she tutted.

"I'm hungry; I need help."

"Help? Hungry? Nothing to trade – no, nothing to trade."

"Is there a village near by?"

"Village? No, no village."

“Any people?”

“Down the hill, down the hill perhaps. You should ask my son.”

“Where is your son?”

“There, there, over there.” She flicked one wrist back up the path, fingers flashing out like the tail of a horse swatting at flies.

“Is it far?”

“No, not so far, not so far.”

“Do you…are you all right here?”

“I’ve got fruit. You want fruit?”

He looked at the half-eaten remains and his stomach churned. “That’s very kind, but I’ll find my way.”

He left her, praying alone to deity unknown.

Chapter 15

There was a downward path on the other side of the ridge, which turned into a scratch in the ground which dissolved into nothing.

At the place where it dissolved, Remy stopped, looking for someone, something, a sign of human life. Birds shrieked in the trees, leaves flapping like sails. The wind was cold, the sun so hot that where it peeped through the foliage it burnt little marks on skin and earth. He listened.

Something creaked between the trees.

Someone cursed, their words lost to the breeze, but then they curse again: “Idiot, idiot, I told you to tie…”

The wind carried the voices away.

Remy turned, and kept turning, listening, looking.

On his third rotation, he saw the elephant. It stood barely fifty yards away, where it had been standing all along. How, he wondered, could a creature so large, so ponderous, hide so well? It looked at him; he looked at it, its ears brushing thoughtfully against the insects that clung to its wrinkled side, its trunk twisting as if trying to chew the air.

For a moment neither moved, paralysed, it seemed by their own mutual surprise at being so encountered. Then a man, tiny and lithe, burst round the side of the elephant’s flank, a sack on his back and a stick in his hand, saw Remy and stopped. His head was shaven, his clothes were an explosion of colour, his trousers torn at the knees and crotch, badly re-patched and the patches torn again, but he didn’t seem to care.

“Hey!” he said at last, when the silence grew too long. “Hey! Have you seen my mother?”

The elephant driver’s name was Songnoom. He was his mother’s second son, king of the forests, master of his tribe. Where, Remy wondered, was the first son?

(He ran away to be a monk; what a disappointment. It’s all very well

seeking spiritual enlightenment, his brother would say, but how's that going to feed anyone?! We shall never speak of this again.)

Songnoom had a rifle. It was an ancient, rusted thing, a remnant of some war. Perhaps it had been cutting edge when first it fired in the Crimea, but each shot needed to be loaded, rammed home, the pan primed, and it was only good for shooting rabbits at very short range, and scaring strangers far from home.

Now Songnoom waved it towards Remy – not the barrel, just the weapon as a whole, as if he himself was uncertain if he was intimidating an enemy or welcoming a friend on a lonely path. Like his mother, his teeth were stained red and black, but unlike his mother he had lost two as a young man and so chewed almost entirely on one side of his mouth, creating a pattern of streaks which faded to pink away from the mashed-up betel nut.

At his command were seven other men, of whom two were brothers, four cousins and one they'd picked up as a child and brought along, and who suffered terribly for his lack of genetic bondage. He also had three elephants under his authority, which regarded the great turbulence of the humans about them with the patience of wily priests who have seen rebellion and heard the changing of the psalms, yet looked up and known the heavens never altered for man's delight.

Any impression that these men might be foresters or locals vanished at the sight of their antiquated arms, and the suspicion dawned – and how right you are – that these might well be traders of a less salubrious sort.

(We peek into their packages and yes, oh yes! Sweet intoxicant poppy, the sap dried out into great beige bricks in the sun, wrapped in linen and sent on its way. This is not China – you will not be beheaded here for your practices – but still, still a risky business, the times being what they are! We cannot blame you for avoiding the road more travelled.)

Questions: who are you? What are you doing here?

Answers: I'm a traveller; I'm lost.

And then, sensing perhaps their illicit goods, seeing their uncomfortable attitude: the British accused me of something I did not do. They hunted me all the way to Bangkok. I'm trying to get to the north, towards Vientiane.

On foot?

I don't have any other choice.

Silence in the forest.

We have arrived at a tricky moment. These are not bad people, these smugglers, are they? How would we define “bad”? Songnoom loves his mother, and for that love would surely do anything to protect her, and if protecting her extended to killing strangers in cold blood, well then, surely that is not a “bad” act, in and of itself, merely the logical conclusion of our line of thought?

We consider our options, balance the pros and cons.

It is the game we play now, and the dice, when they fall, will not fall without some weight. “Chance” is a concept for children.

Perhaps Remy too can hear the rattling of bones inside the case – a player of the game should always have an ear for such things – but what’s he to do? He calculates every move he might make, and they are few, and they achieve…nothing. His fate sits in the hands of a second son, his lips stained like ancient blood. Throw the dice, toss a coin, wait for it to land.

Songnoom’s fingers drum against the butt of his rifle.

Remy looks at the gun and realises he played the moment wrong. He appeals to the brotherhood of bandits, but in confessing that he is hunted, he also admits to being a prize.

A voice calls out, “I dropped my spoon.”

Our eyes turn, as does the whole forest it seems, to see the smuggler’s mother, moving well for a woman whose neck sticks out almost horizontally from her back, waddling down the forest path. Her lips still glisten with the remnant of consumed fruit, her fingers are sticky nectar to gathering flies, but her voice is clear and her feet are steady, for these are her hills, her forests, and though the young boys laugh at her and call her granny, she has known stories that they will never understand.

A little gesture from her son, and those of his boys who were hiding knives in their hands and in their eyes, turn away.

“I dropped my spoon!” she exclaims again, wandering towards the elephants. “I dropped it.”

Remy moves a little away, ready to run as son and mother reunite. Songnoom flaps over his parent, Remy temporarily forgotten; helps her mount an elephant where she sits, tiny on its great back, as comfortable as a queen on her throne. Remy is heading away, slipping between the trees, but perhaps some tendril of filial piety, of honour or gentler thinking has been kindled in this smuggler, because as Remy turns to make good his escape,

Songnoom calls out after him.

“Eh!” he cries. “You want something to eat?”

Chapter 16

A picnic with smugglers and their mother in a forest.

They laugh at how eager he is to eat until they see that it isn't an act, a passing fancy, but the devouring of a man who might otherwise have starved to death.

His clothes are ruined but still curious enough that the youngest of the clan, a boy of some fifteen years, trades them for an old shirt and baggy trousers that he was taking to sell. They are too small for Remy, but big enough that they merely look strange, not uncomfortable. They were too large for the boy anyway; where did he get them, we wonder?

(Won in a race with his elder brother; which brother is not with the clan now, because he is slow at running and likes to gamble, and neither vice is acceptable in a streamlined business operation. The older boy will die in 1943 in Kuala Lumpa with a card sharp's knife through his throat; the younger in 1945 when the Japanese retreat and chaos ensues. When he dies, he'll be wearing a shirt patched with pieces cut from Remy's clothes. So much for chance; so much for fate.)

Remy offers to pay, a few coins, a bare handful for his meal, but the smuggler's mother is sleeping now and something in the peaceful manner of it, the easy way she lies against the warmth of her elephant, which could crush her spindly form with a flick of its trunk, a bump of its side, and yet now waits as she peacefully slumbers – why, perhaps this sight stirs Songnoom to charity which he might not otherwise demonstrate, and so with a merry, "Good luck, foreigner!" he waves Remy freely on his way, to whatever fate might await him.

So much for a picnic in the forest.

Chapter 17

Food, drink, a little sleep in the shelter of the trees. He takes off his boots at last, and his feet are swollen, raging red. He makes a nest between some rocks, starts a very small fire, tiny scraps of kindling, lies down to think.

Where is Abhik Lee?

(Five miles outside Nakhon Sawan, waiting for you to come to him, Remy, waiting for you to walk into his trap.)

Where are Abhik's men?

(Three still scour the hill looking for you, less than four miles away, a tracker and his friends. They are the nearest and most immediate threat, but they have been diverted by the smuggler's paths, tricked into thinking that perhaps you too have followed these routes. Another fifty men and women are circling this area, some on boats, some by bicycle, some not even aware that they are playing the game, but rather pieces played by pieces, given your description and told to find you out with no idea of why. Make no mistake, Remy, you are still in the hive, and the hornets are buzzing.)

What will Remy do now?

He lies back to think, while the sky fills up with stars.

Chapter 18

We look down from the sky above, and between the swaying leaves of the forest, whispering with the sound of a shingle sea, we do not see Remy.

The tracker finds the place where he slept in the morning, but the fire died long ago and he left at sunrise, climbing bare rocks which leave no trace where a man might tell that his foot has fallen.

For a while they follow, guessing at the fugitive's most likely course, but to no avail.

Remy Burke slips away, like breath.

Three days without sighting.

How far may a man on foot go in three days?

Three miles an hour, fifteen hours a day at the very maximum, three days – one hundred and thirty-five miles.

Not possible – no *chance* – that Remy has gone so far!

On the fourth day, Abhik Lee sits down with a map, draws a circle with a hundred-mile radius of the village where last Remy was seen, and ponders. A hundred-mile radius contains within it a vast area of land, but it is easy to eliminate certain points. His men have been on the rivers, in the towns, at the railway stations, and a foreigner attempting to pass these points would have been noticed. No stranger has been seen in any of the major towns nearby, and though his cards are limited, the resources they can deploy are many. Policemen, soldiers and spies roam the countryside looking for Remy Burke, pieces played by a man who is himself being played, all by Abhik Lee.

Oh, Abhik, do you really think the game stops with you? Do you, as you move your pieces across this map, as hypothetical a board as any chess or backgammon set, do you really think that you are the master of all that unfolds?

We forget, sometimes, how young you are.

Rumours proliferate, of course. A stranger seen in Ratchaphon turned out

to be a British journalist, a slave to gin and malaria in roughly equal parts, who was taking a few months out from his posting in Singapore to reconsider his life, and muse whether the time had not come to join the communist party. Another man, glimpsed in Nong Klang was a German archaeologist and his wife. Rumour whispered that the German was, in fact, a Jew, and knew as much archaeology as a killer whale does the tea ceremony but, being a man disowned, invented whatever name it seemed most suited him and thus increased the odds of his survival. A Dutchman twelve miles to the south was searching for precious gems, a crew of thirty quiet locals at his back who neither smiled nor frowned as he paced up and down shouting, “Come, come!” and “Go, go!” at everyone and everything who came near him, these perhaps being the only native words he knew. He was convinced he was going to strike diamond and make it rich, but when the Japanese came he was interned as an enemy alien, and when he was freed in 1945, his voice was broken, though his back was still straight.

All these rumours, Abhik pursues, sending out his pieces to explore every one and knowing, as he does, that none of them are Remy.

The very absence of Remy makes it easier to narrow options.

Somewhere in the wild; somewhere in the wilderness. Sooner or later, he’ll have to show his face, and Abhik knows, without a doubt, that within the circle drawn on his map, he’ll find his prey.

Chapter 19

Day four.

Day five.

Day six.

No sighting.

And what of Remy Burke?

Where are you now?

Why, he sits by the side of a river – no, not even a river – a tributary, a worm of water wriggling through the land that has no name save colloquialisms given by the locals – and fishes.

He was not here yesterday; he will not be here tomorrow. He stole the line and tied it to a bit of wood, skewers his catch on sharpened sticks and cooks it over low ashes. He is tired, muddy, picked over his entire body by insect bites and gently seeping cuts, but his feet are no longer swollen and his belly is occasionally full. One morning he woke to find a snake sizing him up, stretched out to its full length beside him as it assessed whether it could swallow him whole. (It could not, and at his stirring it lost interest.) Another, he woke to find two children – a boy and a girl – staring at him fascinated, enthralled by this leaf-and-bone man hiding in their forest. They ran away when he sat up, and he left his hiding place that very hour, knowing that they could not resist but tell their parents, and their parents would tell a friend, and the friend might tell the police and so, in as little as a few hours or as much as a few days, he would be exposed.

(They told their parents; their parents told their friends. A friend's cousin, whose wife's brother was something in the local police, told his brother-in-law, who had received word six days since from his boss in Nakhon Sawan of a man on the run, a half-breed Anglo-Frenchman with dark brown hair, and at once he alerted the authorities and they all rushed to the place where Remy had last been seen to find only the guts of a fish eaten for breakfast and a few grains of stolen rice gobbled in a banana leaf to indicate his passing.)

Remy wanders, and isn’t as frightened as he was before. After the initial shock of his predicament, he has some semblance now of equilibrium. He walks, he walks, his feet passing through agony until at last, hardened like the black scaldings on thick rattan wood, they settle into their shape within his battered boots, and still he walks. One day he steals a bicycle, abandoning it twenty miles up the road in dense undergrowth and following the course of the river instead. The next day he finds a stout stick which is straight enough to be used for walking, and sleeps in the porch of a high-walled temple which he thought was abandoned, until a monk emerges in the middle of the night to give him some water and a little rice, laying cup and bowl beside him without a word, and an older, more portly monk emerges at dawn with a broom to chase and berate him away.

He will move, and he will hide, and he will avoid people as much as he can, until circumstance conspires against him. And if he must meet people?

He will assume the worst and keep running.

Chapter 20

On the seventeenth day, the woman surprised him. The path ran between rice paddies, laid out with wooden boards. He walked it alone beneath a grey sky threatening rain in the early-morning glow before colour invades the land, and when he looked round, she was there, a bicycle propped against a tree, a chicken in the basket, its feet tied together with string, still alive, head sticking out, watching all things uneasily.

She stared at him hard as he approached, and he smiled and bowed a little, and kept on walking.

Her stare was on his back as he walked away.

Two hours later, on a different path up a nearby hill, he heard the rattling of pedals, the bouncing of hard wheels on rough mud. The chicken was gone from her basket, but this time the woman slowed, pulled up a few paces ahead, lent her bicycle to one side and said in heavily accented French:

“Are you all right, sir?”

He replied in her language and saw the surprise on her face. “I’m very well, thank you.”

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“North. I’m on a pilgrimage.”

“Are you…a holy man?”

“No. Just walking.”

This little exchange was enough to carry him by, but she dismounted and caught up with him, matching her pace with his to walk alongside. “How can you be on a pilgrimage if you’re not a holy man?”

“I think pilgrimages are meant to make people holy.”

“Or wipe away sin from evil – that is the other meaning, is it not?”

“In some cultures.”

“You look like a man of some cultures.”

Now he looked at her more closely, taking in her man’s clothes, her broad-rimmed hat, her skin roughened by the sun. With a little work she

could have passed for a boy, but she made no effort either way and the effect was oddly attractive. He looked away. They walked together a while in silence.

"Have you been on this pilgrimage long?"

"Not so long, no."

"Why did you go?"

"I had a gambling problem."

"Ah – that is a terrible thing!"

"I made a bet that I shouldn't have made. It may cost me dear. I think – at least, my friend says – that I was tricked into making it, that something more than the drink was behind this mistake. But it was still me, still my voice that agreed, still my game." He spoke quickly, low, surprised to hear his voice. How long had it been since he'd had human company? The days stretched in the wild when you hid from human sight.

"So you are running away from your debts?"

"No. I am walking to win the game."

"But you said you were on pilgrimage."

"Can it not be both?"

"I do not think a pilgrimage is a proper pilgrimage if you are also using it as an excuse to visit your favourite aunt, or buy silk cheaply to re-sell," she murmured sombrely. "That's just business dressed up in orange robes."

"Yet here I am, walking alone, and though my intentions may be one thing, could we not suggest that the road also changes me?"

"Very well: in the best case scenario, you *are* on a pilgrimage, but you could be on a far more effective one if you were also not walking to win."

"I can…accept that premise."

They walked again a while in silence.

"Why are you talking to me?" he asked. "I don't have money."

"That's a pity – I don't either."

"Most people avoid me."

"Of course they do – you are strange."

"Does that make you strange for talking to a stranger?"

"I am a widow. If I talk to a man, people whisper about me. So I talk to you."

"Because…I am not a man?"

"You have chosen the loneliest hour and the emptiest road to walk down.

And you are foreign – that makes you something other than a man, and in speaking to you I am something other than a widow. I lived with my husband on the shores of the lake. He used to sell fish to a Frenchman there, a priest come to convert us. The priest wasn't very persuasive, but he liked the climate and the food, and said that if God had given so few people into his hands, then surely this was a sign that he should stay where he was for longer, rather than move on in search of easier pastures. He made this thing a joke. Then my husband had a pain in his ear, and he died."

"I'm…sorry to hear that."

"After, I was going to be a nun in the temple."

"Why didn't you?"

"Women cannot pray with the men. They cannot be blessed – it is unclean for the abbot's hands to touch a woman's head, even a baby's."

"What about nuns?"

"Nuns can touch the children, but nuns sweep and run errands and do not engage in the discourse."

"You…wanted to be a nun to engage in discourse?"

"Of course I did. The generals rule the country; the king is confined to his palace; the communists fight the nationalists who fight the Japanese in China and in India Ghandi walks to the sea to harvest salt. Of course I want to debate and meditate and pray."

"That seems…good."

They kept on walking. Finally she said, "Are you heading to Sok Prah?"

"I don't know. Where's that?"

"It's the village on the other side of this hill."

"Then I suppose I am."

"That's where I live."

"I see."

"I don't think you should go there."

"Why not?"

"The monks there are narrow-minded."

"That's a terrible condemnation for a monk."

"It's an easy trap to fall into. You pray, you think, you pray, and in time you forget that the world is bigger than your thoughts. It's noble for men of business to spend time at temple. I think it is also noble for men of the temple to sometimes spend a week down a mine or delivering babies, yes?"

Despite himself, Remy smiled. “You might be on to something there.”

They walked.

“Also,” she said, “two days ago, two men came into the village: soldiers. They had a picture of a white man, a foreigner, which they stuck to the wall of our elder’s home. He’s a stranger, on the run, a reward of five hundred baht for anyone who helps find him. Five hundred baht is a lot of money in these parts.”

They walked.

“Thank you,” he said at last. Then, as an afterthought, “If they said I committed any crimes, did anything violent, they are lying.”

“Are they?”

“I…play a game sometimes. That is all.”

“What kind of game?”

“Hide-and-seek.”

“Like the children play?”

“Exactly like the children play. I am hiding; someone else is seeking. When he catches me, we’ll swap sides and I’ll seek him. The winner is the one who stays hidden the longest.”

“You are playing a very odd game.”

“I was drunk when I said yes.”

“And this game you also call a pilgrimage?”

“A good game does more than make you smile. Is there a road that doesn’t take me through your village?”

“No. But there’s a path that will take you to a temple, and from there you can climb down to the river.”

“This temple…full of cantankerous monks?”

“They might not sell you out for five hundred baht. Although,” she smiled, “it only takes one, doesn’t it?”

They walked.

“I live outside the village,” she said eventually. “They say that widows bring bad luck. I am poor.”

“And the men who came to your village are rich,” he conceded.

“Are you playing for money? This pilgrimage game of yours, these debts you are afraid of – is it money?”

“No. If I win, I gain life. If I lose, I lose my mind.”

“Those seem like very high stakes.”

“As I said: drunk.”

“Does your game let you kill people?” she asked, sudden and bright, not slackening her pace as she walked beside him. “Is that something you do?”

“There’s no rule against it, but I would still have to make that choice.”

“Would you kill me to keep me quiet? I’ve seen you on this road – I could cycle ahead, go to the village, to the town, to the railway station; they have a man there who speaks Morse code – I could be rewarded. For five hundred baht, people will forget that I’m a widow. If you bet your life, are you willing to take my life to keep your secret safe?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Your body would be found; people would search.”

“Not me; they don’t care.”

“Perhaps they wouldn’t search for your murderer because of any fondness for you. Perhaps they’d only look for fear for their own daughters, wives.”

“Ah – that is a good point! So you wouldn’t kill me because it doesn’t gain you anything?”

“I also like to think I have a code.”

“But the code is not within the game?”

“No.”

“Does it help you win?”

“It…Possibly not. Yet I still have it. But as I said, the situation hasn’t arisen.”

“And so you haven’t been tested? Perhaps you’re right,” she mused. “Perhaps you are also on a pilgrimage.”

“You want something,” he said, stopping, turning to look into her face. “Tell me.”

“I wanted discourse,” she replied. “You are the first person to talk to me for five months.”

With that, all words die on his tongue.

What do we see here, in this moment? This woman, stick-thin beneath her baggy clothes, standing stiff and straight before a stranger. The people of her village avoid her gaze, turn away; she brings bad luck; she is twice cursed – once for being a widow, and a second time for having no children to support her in her state. Husbands die, but wives who do not produce an heir – they walk in the devil’s shadow! Good people, good monks, good friends, they do

not wish her ill – they just wish her elsewhere. Life is too hard for complexity; let questions of the “right” of things be asked when there is more rice in the bowl, more fish in their bellies. Let someone else shake society to its roots; let those who have more time for it wonder at the lot of widows.

She speaks, and it is the first time in five months that she has spoken so many words altogether. For a while, in her isolation, she spoke to the stars, to the dawn, to the birds in the trees, to the Buddha and all his aspects, and to herself. But her words became repetitive and banal, and so she fell silent until now.

Remy Burke has not spoken for four days, and thought he might go insane from it.

“I have a little money,” he said. “May I buy some food from you?”

Chapter 21

Her name was Fon. She was born on the day that the monsoon began, and the winds had blown so violently that the roof of the hut was shaken with it, and water poured in across her face, a blessing, her mother always said, not a sign of nature's rage.

Her hut lay outside the village, up a stairway of mud cut into the side of a small hill, obscured by low-drooping palms and scarred boulders. The hut was a single room raised up by poles a foot or so above the earth, with a roof of leaves. There had once been a door of tough, dry leaves threaded through a frame, but the frame had cracked and the door now rested on the ground, waiting for repair, the room open to the night. She cooked outside in a pit of charcoal and rounded stones. They ate as the sun went down, listening to the change in the pitch of the forest noises. From the top of the low hill, they could look down into the village, a little circle of candles and cooking fires picked out against the darkness. She said that the hut had belonged to her mother, who had died there four years since, and whose spirit – so the people said – still haunted this lonely hill.

He slept on the floor at her feet, as the wind tumbled shreds of nightmare dreams around them.

In the morning, she said, "I wanted to make the door better, but it's hard to do alone."

She already had the tools she needed – wedges cut from fallen branches, a few nails carefully salvaged from her trips to the town, a hammer and a rusting saw. She commanded him with perfect precision and he obeyed, and by noon, the thing was done. In the afternoon she sat down to mend a fishing net, and he watched, until without a word, he joined her, and she said, "I've been doing it a little at a time."

"I'm not going to be much use – it's not something I do often."

"You'll be of use," she corrected firmly. "It's good to have company."

When the sun fell, she looked down towards the light of the village and

tutted and said, “I shall have to go down there tomorrow.”

“What do you trade with them?”

“Herbs I collect from the hills. Fish, if I’m lucky. Squirrels and birds I catch in snares. But they know I live alone, so it’s easy to rob me. They aren’t bad people – just hungry ones. Their children are hungry. If you could get something more to feed your child, wouldn’t you?”

“Probably.”

“If it was within your code?”

“As I said before – it hasn’t been tested.”

On the third day, she cycled into the village, and he collected wood to burn and checked snares, and when she returned she laid her bicycle against the wall of the hut and said, patting the handlebars, “Without this, I think I would have died a long time ago.”

At the end of the first week, they sat side by side in silence, watching the stars come out between the trees, until at last he said, “I have some money you can have.”

“You help me with my work; I don’t need money.”

“Nevertheless, I have some; you could use it. Please don’t be…please accept it.”

“No,” she replied softly, pushing his open hand away from hers. “If I started spending baht, people would suspect. They’d wonder where I got it, and you’d be in danger.”

“There are ways around that, surely?”

“You play your games – tell me, are there any ways that aren’t a risk?”

“No. Probably not.”

“There you are.”

On the ninth day, she touched him lightly on the arm, an unconscious thing, a brush asking for attention.

He looked up, smiled, and she pulled immediately away, holding her fingers in the palm of her other hand, like a woman stung. Said a few empty words – we aren’t interested in what – and walked quickly away.

She could not remember the last time she had touched another person, but we can. Nine months and twenty-four days ago, a woman helped you pick up your bag when you dropped it, but you did not enshrine the feel of her fingers against yours in your memory, not knowing that it would be the last time a

person would touch you for so many long, cold nights.

On the morning of the twelfth day they walked through the forest, setting snares and collecting roots, until at last she asked:

"Why is the game so important?"

"I told you – if I lose, I lose everything."

"But why do you play? Why does it matter so much to you to be a player?"

"It's…I like the victory. The…challenge. My days are not mundane. I do not sit and solve logistical problems; I do not try to get the trains to run between Mandalay and Rangoon; I am not tasked with moving crates in the harbours of Hong Kong or digging pits in Xian. It is not…daily dullnesses that oppose me, but rather brilliant minds. I fight brilliant minds, and when I win, when I know that I was better…but even in defeat, sometimes, there is joy. In witnessing the beauty, the brilliance of another player, of feeling your heart race, your face burn with the excitement of it, with the excitement of your plans, their plans; chance doesn't enter as a factor: it's not luck; it's not nature; it's just…*me*. My mind, the pieces and the game. It is…incredible. Perfect. I…would find it hard to give that up."

They walked together a while longer, until she said, "But you were drunk."

"What?"

"When you agreed to this game, the game you play now – you were drunk."

"I…was. Yes. Abhik…played me well in that regard."

"Did no one try to stop you?"

"I don't know. I have a friend – I say 'friend'. He's a player, one of the oldest, possibly the very oldest still alive, friendship is always part of something else, enjoyable, perhaps, as all games are, but still…things within the house are never quite what they seem."

"I don't think that is what I'm asking."

"Then what?"

"I think…I am asking if you are sure that this thing you are experiencing is happiness. Or, if it *is* happiness, if it is worthy."

"It is only a game."

"Does it do no harm?"

“It… I have a code,” he replied. “The game is what it is, but I have a code.”

“I think you have answered the question, therefore, for yourself.”

On the fifteenth day he put his hands on her shoulders, a silent greeting, a wordless comfort as she watched the forest. Her body turned, as if one part wanted to run, the other sink. Then she swallowed, lifted her chin, stood up and moved away.

That evening he said, “I cannot stay in one place too long.”

“Do you think your enemies will find you here?”

“I am sure they are still searching. Perhaps they assume I have slipped the net and have given up on this area. But I doubt it. Abhik will have cards he can play across the whole country – I’m sure he’ll be holding some pieces here. And I…there are things I must do.”

“What things?”

“Victory comes to the man who stays hidden the longest. I am a stranger in this country; even here, even with you, I cannot stay hidden for ever. I have questions that need answering. I do not understand why Abhik wanted to play this game. I do not understand why the Gameshouse permitted it to happen.”

“You said you were drunk?”

“The game isn’t balanced. Abhik has a natural, immediate advantage. He can hide in this country; his face is not remarked. My skin makes it harder for me to hide. He has resources he can access; had time to put his pieces in place – pieces more than those dealt in his hand. I did not. A game isn’t fun if it’s merely the inevitable destruction of an opponent. The Gamehouse might have intervened, balanced the bet before it was made, but it didn’t. That is… curious.”

She nodded quietly, eyes turned away from him into the forest. “If it is important to you, you must do it.”

In the night, they lay together on opposite sides of the hut. She turned her back to him as he undressed, and pulled her thin blanket high about her chin as she settled to sleep.

They lay, faces turned away, eyes open, pretending to sleep.

Chapter 22

The following morning he woke, and she said, “I’m going to get supplies.”

He watched her cycle down in the grey morning light while the forest whispered and the flies gathered with the rising day. He paced the edge of the hut for a while, and as light burnt the moisture away and the heat began to beat down even into the shade, driving it back, he paced the edges of the forest.

The sun rose higher and he walked and sat, and walked a little more, and drew dirt patterns with a stick on the floor, and stared into the sky, and walked, and waited.

Shortly after noon he heard the clattering of a bicycle on the path. He stood, breathless, though he didn’t know why, until she appeared, a bag on her back, basket full of fruit and uncooked rice tied in leaves. He opened his mouth to say – what?

A moment of could-have-been. We take in breath as he does, find ourselves ready to say sorry, farewell, hello, goodbye, adieu, let me stay, forgive me, be with me – why, all these dance on our tongue at that moment of inhalation, but for Remy…

…he said nothing at all, for she spoke first, slinging herself awkwardly off the bicycle which dropped where she left it, scampering towards him, her hands pressing against his arms in an instant, holding tight.

“You’ve got to go!” she hissed. “You have to go now!”

“I don’t…”

“I went to the village and they all stared at me, then looked away. The children stared, the old women stared, the mothers stared, the fathers stared, and when I went to go, the farmer’s son turned to his mother and said, ‘Will they take her too?’ The richest farmer in the town has a cart he rides to market – the cart wasn’t there and neither was he, but the market isn’t for three days. They must have seen you – you have to go.”

“This isn’t proof,” he replied, pulse pounding in the soft flesh beneath his

tongue, throat tight, air thin. “This doesn’t mean…”

She pushed a bundle of rice wrapped in leaves into his hand. “You have to go,” she repeated. “They know.”

He gathered his meagre belongings in a daze, didn’t complain when she pushed a cup into his bag as well, and a wooden spoon. Then he stood before the fixed door of her hut, she in it, and said like one in a daze, “What about you?”

“I am not in danger of my life.”

“Aren’t you?”

“This game – will you win it?”

“I…Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Go,” she repeated with a little shake of her head. “Just go.”

He didn’t move.

“If you lose you are useless to me,” she said. “Go.”

He did.

Chapter 23

Anger is not a helpful emotion for a player.

He walks the rural paths again, away from the road, away from people, away from anything but the beating of the sun and the turning of the wind, and reminds himself that he is not angry. Angry at himself, angry at Fon, angry at Abhik Lee, angry at the Gameshouse, angry at…

Nothing of significance, he tells himself, and feels immediately guilty for feeling any thoughts except gratitude towards his sometime host.

He is not angry.

Angry is not helpful.

He reminds himself of this many times as he walks through the forest.

Chapter 24

At night, he settled down to sleep beneath the sheltering leaves of a drooping palm tree, and thought himself safe until he woke with a start and saw the torchlight flashing through the forest, heard the voices murmuring to each other in the dark, the crack of feet. How had they come so close, five hundred yards, maybe fewer, maybe four? He pulled his bag onto his back and ran, blind through the dark.

At the commotion, the others, the wanderers in the night, turned their light towards him, and someone gave a cry, and they ran also, charging after him through the busy, buzzing dark.

He ran until he came to a stream, and then he ran along that, gasping for breath, face streaming with sweat and tears, legs shaking, lungs breaking, and still they came behind him, one ahead of the others, barefoot and nimble, dressed in a long shirt and shorts held up with rope, his hair braided to his head – a tracker, no doubt *the* tracker, a piece played from Abhik's Lee's hand, more potent and dangerous than any hired help.

Remy ran, until he tripped and got straight back up, and knew the hot nothing he felt in his ankle would be a price he would pay later, and kept on running until his legs gave way, and his lungs failed, and belly burning, face popping, he dropped onto his hands and knees in the soil, rolled onto his back, shuddered and shook.

The running of his pursuer slowed a little behind him. Blinking back tears, he stared into torchlight, half glimpsing the reflection of the man who stood behind it, lean as a chestnut tree, a void in his expression that was all professionalism, a man about the job. He edged closer to Remy, and from his rope belt pulled a machete, and from around his belly undid more rope and, edging closer one step at a time, hovered over the fallen player, resting the tip of the blade just above Remy's chest.

"You won't kill me," gasped the player in Thai. "It would be against the rules." The man didn't respond, showed no understanding in his face. "Abhik

wins only when he tags me himself, only if I'm alive," he said again in French. "You won't kill me."

French seemed to be more comprehensible, for the man's blade immediately turned, the sharpened curve resting just below Remy's right eye.

Alive, said the blade in silent steel, doesn't necessarily mean unharmed.

Slow – so slow – the tracker squatted down by Remy's side, the blade not moving from its point. Behind him, struggling to keep up in the dark, were the sounds of the other pursuers, less fleet of foot and sure of their way than this man. In a moment, the hunter would call out to them, summon them to the kill, and that would be that: game over.

Remy closed his eyes, drew in breath, and the hunter, perhaps sensing something of what this pertained, closed his lips tight. Then Remy rolled, knocking the blade to one side with the back of his arm while kicking up as hard as he could towards the hunter's face. The hunter rolled too, pulling the machete free, but Remy threw himself bodily on top of the other man, ignoring the blade, ignoring the fingers that clawed at his face, trying to get purchase on his eyes, digging for the sockets. A moment in which all was leg and arm, too many limbs for anything to do any good, no order to the fight, merely elbows in guts, knees in groins, fists in faces, then Remy wiggled his elbow free from the medley and dropped down, point first, his entire body weight into the man's throat.

The hunter's eyes popped wide in his skull. He wheezed, staring up at nothing, and hands which had clawed and scratched now fell dully to the earth. Remy rolled free from his stricken attacker and, hearing still the sounds of the others in the wood behind him, turned and ran.

Chapter 25

Bitter wakings on a clouded morning.

Abhik Lee wakes to see the face of one of his players – a hunter, a good piece which he played well – standing before him.

The face is swollen, the neck bound up with cloth as if that might alleviate the puffed-up redness some. The hunter, when he speaks, does so in French, which he does not speak well, and his voice is hoarse.

“He got away.”

Abhik Lee leans the tips of his fingers against the spot between his eyebrows where, some have said, an invisible third eye resides, or where perhaps he simply felt the most irritation.

“He was on foot?”

“Yes. Going north. We are still looking; he won’t be far. He was injured.”

“How injured?”

“We fought. I hit him several times. He was limping too when he ran away.”

“You couldn’t catch a limping man?”

“He was more violent than you gave me to think. You said he would surrender easily; he was soft, fearful. You led us to believe that he could not survive in the wild for more than a few days.”

“That was the impression I had of him, certainly.”

“Your impression, monsieur, was wrong.”

The corner of Abhik’s nether lip contracts just a little, and again he taps his paired fingers against the centre of his forehead, once, twice, three times, steadying thoughts. He is not used to hearing that he is mistaken; it is an uncomfortable development for one of his inclination, and being uncomfortable, he now makes the greatest mistake of all, and ignores it.

“He will not survive long,” he repeats. “He doesn’t have it in him.”

And what of Remy?

We look, and here we find him at last, barely spotting him where he has fallen. He is nestled in between three stones that have no name, by the side of a rushing waterfall. He wakes slowly, in that he has barely slept and that grey land between sleeping and waking is all the expanse he now wanders. When at last he is fully alert, he simply lies there, looking up at the sky. He has lost the time and the direction of the sun; all he sees is cloud. His ankle is vastly swollen, and were the notion not so unproductively absurd, he might now lie in self-pity and weep.

Now he dreams of returning to Fon, and laments all the foolish things he both said and did not have the wisdom to say.

The sun rises and so must he.

We sit together, you and I, on a high rock above the waterfall, watching the foam surge in the depths below, and from this vantage point, we watch Remy limp away.

Chapter 26

A risk, but he has no choice.

At twilight, before a small monastery of aged monks and scuttling boys, he collapses.

The door is opened by an old man, who tuts and sighs at what he sees and leaves Remy there while he goes to fetch younger boys.

Two children, ten and twelve years old apiece, help him limp to a room which smells faintly of mould.

The very oldest of the monks, a man who walks with the aid of a round-headed stick, sits down to examine Remy's leg, mutters and proclaims that yes indeed, it *is* beyond the monks' medical skill! Bed rest, if you please – bed rest.

"Are you a criminal?" asked the young man, seventeen, orphaned and left to the care of the priests at two years old, as he sat by Remy's side.

"No," he replied.

"How did you get this injury?"

"I fell."

"Are you sure you aren't a criminal? We welcome everyone here, regardless of their past."

"I'm not a criminal."

"Ah – but you are on the run, aren't you?"

"Not from the law."

"Are you sure?"

"I swear it."

In the morning, the oldest monk came back to inspect Remy again and grumbled and proclaimed, "Yes, yes, bed rest, just like I said!"

In the afternoon, the abbot, younger than the oldest monk but vastly more political, came to greet their unexpected guest.

“Novelty upon novelty!” he exclaimed brightly. “A foreigner, injured, who speaks our language! Do you know anything about the path to enlightenment?”

“I hear rumours,” grunted Remy from his pallet on the floor, “that by good deeds and the making of merit for yourself in this life, you may advance through the wheel of the universe.”

“I think it is a wonderful thing that you have come to our monastery,” chuckled the abbot merrily. “For you, for us – for everyone!”

So saying, the abbot returned to his room and wrote a letter to his senior in the larger temple in the town informing him that the man wanted by the police had come to his temple and was there still a sizeable reward posted for his capture, and sent a boy to make sure it was posted and waited happily for the reply.

Chapter 27

On the second day of his stay in the monastery, the rainy season began.

Remy sat within the shelter of a dripping porch, listening to water on the slates above, watching the ground turn to a shimmering black mirror.

The youngest monk, the orphan, sat next to him and said,

“First I am the breath. Then when I am the breath, I am the air. I am the wind that moves through the sky. I am the leaves bending in the trees. I am the earth turning, the soil splitting, the dust that blows away. I am here and above and in all the corners of the earth. I am in the first gasp of the newborn child; I am in the last sigh of the dying mother. I am the sobs of the abandoned lover. I am the laughter of the delighted child. I am breath, I am wind, I am life, and when I am all of these things, *I*, the *I* that was simply me, that sat by you now, was nothing at all.”

At dinner, the abbot asked if any post had come and was told that the rains had made the roads difficult and muddy, and he smiled and said it was to be expected and that he was not worried at all, and Remy watched him from the corners of his eyes and the edges of his smile, and said nothing.

When the bell rang at three in the morning for the monastery to wake and pray beneath the moonlight, the oldest monk came to wake Remy, tutting all the way.

“Good for you,” he said. “Come, come, good for you, try it!”

And when the bell rang again for breakfast, the youngest monk came to him quietly, pulling him into a room away from the others, where he saw his bag, a dry sarong and hat, a stick to lean on, sandals and rice wrapped in leaves. The monk said:

“Two weeks ago we were all told to look out for a foreign criminal on the run. The abbot said it was of great merit to hand him to the police or the soldiers, and so has decided we shall.”

“Why would you tell me this?”

“It is interesting, isn’t it?” asked the monk with a smile. “The others tell

me I am not wise in my speech."

So saying, he turned away, and Remy picked up these meagre goods and slunk away without a word.

Chapter 28

A strange sight!

A man, with an overgrown brown beard, brown hair, pale skin burnt by the sun, dressed in a medley of clothes that are halfway between a smuggler's shirt and a monk's robes, a rucksack on his back, limps towards Lampang.

The land in the north is more mountainous, wild and beautiful. The water that sweeps down from the mountains carves great valleys, as if the rotation of the earth itself has turned all things into gentle curves: curving plateaus and curving streams; curving roads and curving trees. It is a land of pineapples, teak trees and white pottery fashioned with delicate kaolin clay. At dawn the low cloud caresses the tops of the mountains, burning away as the sun rises. By sunset the shadows have turned, a great twist of grey sweeping across the land, and the wind whispers through the forests and over the rivers with the smell of rotting leaves and fragrant flowers which open when the rains cease.

Alone again, and injured, Remy Burke heads north to Lampang.

Twice in two days he was nearly caught.

The first – an army truck that came out of nowhere on a deserted, muddy road. The bridge had gone down on the main causeway, swept away by a flood, so the truck took this less travelled path, and Remy, hearing it approach, runs for the undergrowth, throws himself into its cover, cowers there as the soldiers drive by, heads down, tarpaulin flowing with the rains.

The second – a police roadblock near the flat blue waters of Mae Wa. Someone must have seen him and spread the word– who? we wonder (a poacher and his son, who told a friend, who told a cousin, who knew the chief of police, who had received his orders in this regard not five nights since, and a warning that the suspect was most likely headed in his direction) – for there they were, three indolent policemen, their trousers splattered with the mud of the road, chewing betel nut and spitting red juice into the puddles

at their feet, miserable in the rain, waiting for him to come.

He watched them from a ridge some quarter of a mile above the curve of the road that they defended, lying on his belly as he assessed them and his path. He'd walked twenty miles to find the junction they guarded, and did not want to go back, not with his shoes rotting from the rains, his legs black with mud, his belly empty, his ankle sore. He hid instead in a little clump of dripping trees, eating his last banana and its flowers, shivering from the rain. Cold and damp now were settling in his throat and mind, making one ache, the other cloudy. How much longer could he keep this up?

Not long.

As long as it took.

Shortly after sunset, the policemen on the road abandoned their mission, pedalling back to town. He slapped wet-footed past their cordon, saw the lights of a village ahead, did not dare approach. He slept badly that night and woke with a fever, and fished on the lake in the morning and caught very little, and felt sick after eating, but at least managed to keep his food down.

Fever trapped him where he was. For three days he lay on the edge of the lake, drinking and stealing fruit from the trees, shaking and whispering comforts to himself. Sometimes he spoke French, sometimes English. Sometimes he remembered a story his father would tell as they walked together by the ghats of Varanasi, back in the days when empire was great and the rituals of the Hindus washing themselves in prayer was a thing to be indulged, a childlike game which the British would point and snigger at, and the polite ladies would turn away from, flushing hot to see so much flesh so easily displayed in the brown waters of the Ganges. Then his mind wandered to his mother, who took him one day to see the temples of lost Cambodia, whispering in his ear that he shouldn't tell his grandfather she had brought him there, for it wasn't considered right that a dignified lady take an interest in the barbaric traditions of the locals. Then she knelt by him and showed ancient carved texts, images of gods and kings, the graffiti of long-dead children scratched with a blade's point across holy icons, the fallen stones of a place where once people went into the jungle to pray for rains to feed their crops, sunshine to harvest in. He'd run up and down the carved stones of the broken temples and laughed and asked if he could play hide-and-seek, while around them the jungle shrieked and the lithe monkeys blinked suspiciously over their trove of stolen mangos.

That had been before the games he played became…something else.

On the fourth day, the fever broke, and he lay naked in the water of the lake, eyes closed, head back, and listened to the rumbling in his ears. He caught one last fish and cooked it on hot charcoal, and watched a little boat sailing across the water, a parasol protecting its sole inhabitant, three lines suspended off its prow, until the owner of the boat saw him and, waving slowly, paddled closer.

The man was a fisherman, sixty if he was a day, missing three teeth, two on the bottom of his jaw, one on the top.

"Are you lost?" he asked.

"No, not lost – looking for a way across the lake."

"Get in, then, get in!"

He got in.

Across the waters, the fisherman talked brightly, of his wife (dead), his sons (noble), his daughters-in-law (not good enough though at least they tried) and his grandchildren and great-grandchildren (beautiful, all of them, so very beautiful). His seven sons had themselves married and produced between them some thirty-eight grandchildren for him to call his own, and of these thirty-eight, twenty-nine were already churning out offspring – each of which he could name and character – bringing the total number of direct blood relatives within a twenty-mile radius of this lake to seventy-three.

"It would have been seventy-four," he sighed, "but one of them moved away."

Which was, in its way, a kind of death.

On the other side of the lake, Remy stood unevenly on firmer shores and said, "How far is it to Lampang?"

"If you follow the road, about two days' walk – but the road is on the other side of the water."

"And how far if I stay away from the road?"

"Four, five days of hard walking. But you don't want to do that – you're injured, you've been sick. Stay at mine a while; my daughter-in-law will look after you."

"I cannot. When you go home, you will find that people ask after me. A foreigner, a tall man with fair skin. They will tell you I'm a criminal."

“You’re not a criminal!” chuckled the old man. “I’ve got seventy-three children – do you think I don’t know a criminal when I see one? You’re a pilgrim, sure as these eyes can see by sunlight!”

“Then you understand why I take the harder road.”

The fisherman shrugged. “The Gautama tried starving and suffering on his path to enlightenment, but it was only with a full belly that he truly achieved Nirvana – at least, that’s what I think.”

And as they turned to part ways, Remy hesitated, then turned back. “May I…?” he began, then stopped, stumbling, not on the words, but the very notion of what he was about to speak. Trust had grown thin, so thin, and now it stuck in his throat, but he took a long, slow breath and tried anyway. “When you tell people about me – and feel free to do so – will you tell them…?…tell them I asked the way to Phrae. Tell them that my ankle was very bad, and you did not take me across the water. But if you would be very kind, do not tell them for a day. Or two? I have nothing to offer but my gratitude, and my word that you do no harm to any man and a great deal of good in doing so.”

The fisherman sucked in his lips as far the tip of his nose slanted downwards, seemed to quiver on the verge of being swallowed whole, a face collapsing into a face. Then he smiled, waved his hands joyfully in the air and said, “Well, no one listens to me anyway!”

Remy bowed low and walked away.

Chapter 29

Four days later, hobbling out of the forest and the hills, he came to Lampang.

Once the pride of the Lanna kingdom, the city still maintained its walls, its gold-plated temples, its fondness for spiced banana and its pride, seeming in its mountain-shadowed way to proclaim that it was still a state unto itself, needing little of the outside world to bother it. Go to Chiang Mai or Bangkok, or cross the border to Myanmar if you felt the need to run to work, to argue in the streets, to buy exotic things or banter in loud voices through the dead of night. Lampang was a quiet place for quiet people, and heaven forefend that it change.

Remy stood a while on the side of the hill, watching this little place, houses on stilts on the rolling Wang River, which, like so many waterways in this land, flowed eventually back to the Chao Phraya and south to the sea. He listened to the sound of the horse-drawn traps bouncing through the streets, the cry of the elephant drivers hauling their goods into town, the rattle of harnesses and the slosh of oars, all noises travelling gently upwards, amplified by the distant rising of the mountains on either side.

To enter Lampang was a risk, for there would be authorities there that would be watching, however well he had lost his pursuers in the mountains, and no matter if they believed the fisherman's tale of his turning east towards Phrae, not west to the river. (Good fortune: the fisherman lied, feeling jubilant as he did so, and the word reached Abhik Lee, who diverted a general and all his troops to Phrae at once, and sent his hunters back into the hills and found no trace of Remy as he did.)

Yet whatever his fortune, he would be noticed, and his position given away by his entering the town. All of Abhik's resources would turn, they would come seeking him, and he would have to run again, where before now he had merely wandered.

A great risk: a terrible danger.

One that now, with a half-nod of his head, he took.

Chapter 30

Oh Remy, oh Remy, what are you doing?

You are buying two tickets at the railway station in Lampang – one to Chiang Mai, the other to Bangkok.

We watch the bewildered expression on the vendor's face as you make your purchase, precious baht which you have nursed so carefully coming from your bag.

We watch you head onto the platform, a tattered man in tattered clothes, an every-which-way ragdoll – the police will come for you soon, they will come, but first comes the Chiang Mai–Bangkok train, a great new roaring thing with a diesel engine, black and proud, clattering like a laughing dinosaur's jaw, easing into the station with a scream of steel. You board, heading north, bold as anything, smiling your most serene smile, sit in a compartment with two other travellers – a woman who holds a sleeping baby, and a man in a business suit, Japanese, who smiles courteously at you over his newspaper and then looks away and never looks back.

Remy studies the landscape as it grumbles by. There is much he needs to note.

(Who are these travellers? Why, she goes to visit her mother who is dying for the twelfth time and will die three more times again, each time complaining vociferously to the assembled, summoned relatives that she has been abandoned by her family, before finally she passes away in 1947 from a fall in the street which knocks her head, and from which she doesn't wake. And he? Why, he knows about railways, has studied railways and studies now the railways that connect China to India, and will one day very soon, from an office, orchestrate on maps and with carefully marked little notes, the construction of railway lines by captured slave labour, and say when the war ends that Japan only meant to bring freedom to the people of the East, only an end to tyranny. So we see them, these fellow travellers on this train, and they being known, we turn away.)

At Chiang Mai, you get off this train, then board the train heading in the opposite direction, south to Bangkok, and as it begins to move from the platform, you jump off again, hopping from the open balcony at the back of a carriage onto the gravel, rolling as you land, then pick yourself up and dust yourself off, and run from the track.

We watch Remy – now we watch him, squatting by a little well outside the square line of the city's moat, pumping water into a cup, shaving with his nearly blunted knife the great growth of beard that smothers his jaw and chin, dragging it back to reveal the pale skin beneath, shockingly untouched by the sunlight compared to the browned rims of his eyes. He sits now and scrapes the hair from his head, blood flecking water as he scratches it to near-baldness, before popping a wide straw hat on top of the exposed flesh and wrapping his skinny, burnt body in a dusty robe.

What does he look like now? A wandering monk, perhaps, if you do not look too closely. A beggar. A madman. A holy man. A parched prophet from the desert.

Whatever he is, he does not look much like Remy Burke.

He sleeps rough on the streets of Chiang Mai that night, while the wild dogs circle each other and wonder if he is prey. It is one of the most peaceful nights of sleep he has had for a very long time.

When the sun rises, he steals a bicycle and pedals some twenty miles out of town, arriving in a stinking sweat a few hours before midday. He reaches a bridge across a low stream, a single-track thing of already rusting iron, which no train dare cross at more than a snail's pace, and as the flies gather around him and the forests ripple, he sits down cross-legged on the side of the track to wait.

He breathes, and it seems to him that his breath is wind, that wind is air, that air spins across the world, through the lungs of Abhik Lee, pacing the platform of Lampang waiting for the train, through the flamed nostrils of the players and the pieces of the Gameshouse, across the waters of the Chao Phraya, and out to sea. It seems to him for a moment that he is nothing, and he is not afraid.

Then comes the singing in the tracks, the pumping of the engines, the growling of the train. He rolls down on his belly, waiting for the train to arrive, hidden in the undergrowth. The Chiang Mai–Bangkok express, heading south, kills its speed as it approaches the bridge as it did yesterday

when he rode it north, the engine barely chugging, and at a meagre four or five miles an hour, it begins its cautious crossing of the ways.

Remy waits until the first few carriages are over, then without a sound rises up from the undergrowth, jogs until he is running, running until he is keeping pace, and with a great heave and flap of robe, pulls himself aboard the rear of the last carriage of the train, and up into safety.

Chapter 31

Stops on a line.

Lamphun, Phitsanulok, Lopburi, Ayutthaya, Don Muang.

Remy sits and watches the countryside and cannot remember the last time he felt so relaxed.

The compartment is empty until Ayutthaya, when a British man in a linen suit and his wife get on. The man smells profoundly through the layers of his sweat-stained jacket, but this doesn't stop his wife wrinkling her nose at the sight of Remy and whispering in prickling English, "He smells *terrible*."

"He's just a monk, darling," whispers the man.

"Can't we go to another compartment?"

"Darling, you're making a fuss – we can't always avoid the natives."

With a grunt, the wife settles down in the seat as far away from Remy as she can, while her husband positions himself between them as a form of shield. He looks at Remy and smiles, proclaiming in extraordinarily accented Thai, "Good morning."

"Good morning," Remy replies in the same language, pressing his palms together, and turning away to look out of the window before they can see his own smile.

A world outside. Motion without movement. Workers resting beneath the shade of a banana tree. Mangos rotting on the earth. Nets thrown into a river by stick-skinny girls. The banging of the gong from temple. Many stops, waiting for another train to clear the narrowest point in the track ahead. Sometimes the rain falls; sometimes the skies clear, brilliant blue flecked with white that turns black again as quickly as the clouds parted, and turns the distant hills and fields to dusty grey.

The British man says:

"Can't trust these people, these Siamese, to do anything. Can't trust them to get a job done. 'Tomorrow,' they say, and then the next day: 'Tomorrow.'

You ask what the hold-up is and they say, ‘I’ll do it tomorrow,’ and when you insist they say, ‘I need to order a part.’ Why didn’t they order it yesterday? ‘I’ll do it tomorrow,’ they reply, and that is the end of the argument! No, better off with a Chink. Hard worker, your average Chink, but wily too, will rob you if you blink but if you show him who’s master, make it clear you’re not having any funny business, they’ll do all right by you. Your Malay is the laziest of the lot, but responds well to the rod, but your Jap! Gotta admire a Jap, you have. Damn me if the blighters aren’t almost like us!”

Remy listens, his face turned away, and says nothing at all.

He is still as the train moves.

He is motion.

He is a fixed point on the earth.

He is the earth as it turns.

He is here.

He is everywhere.

He is nothing at all.

As they pull into Bangkok, the rain is falling from black skies, the drops so fat and hard they bounce off the skin, exploding off the heads of people running for shelter. Remy leans out of the compartment window and sees a queue stretching away from the platform’s edge.

Soldiers, two dozen or more, stopping every man and woman who try to pass them by. Remy looks up the other end of the platform, but there are more men, armed, watched over by the great benevolent portrait of the king which hangs high above; all eyes turn to the train from Chiang Mai.

With a little intake of breath, he pulls himself back into the compartment, while the Englishman and his wife mutter together.

“He looks funny…” whispers the wife.

“Darling, you can’t say that.”

“But he does…”

…as they climb off the train.

Terror now in Remy’s breast. He has walked across half of Thailand only to return to Bangkok but his movements, it seems, have been predicted, his presence marked. How did Abhik know? How did Abhik come to monitor this station?

He sits breathless in the compartment of the slowly emptying train and realises he doesn't know what to do. Stay on the train a while longer, see if it will carry him north again? Run and hide? Make a break for it? If he makes a break for it and is seen, his plan will be ruined, the whole purpose of this dangerous exercise destroyed. Getting on the trains was an operation in opportunities, an expansion of options, no longer *this* section of wilderness or *that* area of farmland could he be in, but wherever the trains roamed, Padang to Nong Khai. Yet here were soldiers, waiting in Bangkok, and it can only be that his ruse has not worked!

The conductor came along the carriage, checking each compartment, calling for the last stop. At his approach, Remy pretended to doze, an instinctive move, and the conductor called him briskly awake, telling him to get off the train. He nodded and smiled and made to gather his things as the conductor walked by, shuffling into the corridor with no idea where to go.

Blend into the crowd? Hope that the soldiers guarding the platform were working to an old description: a bearded foreigner, a man in tattered clothes, a wounded stranger?

A great danger, but what alternative did he have? He pulled his hat down lower upon his head, put his hand upon the door, took a deep breath and heard a voice call his name.

"I say, Remy," it said, "you do look extraordinary."

Chapter 32

A moment to pity – shall we pity – Abhik Lee?

Poor old Abhik, you thought victory would be so easy! Remy Burke, an indulged, pampered player, who drinks too much and talks too easily. You had him chalked up as an armchair general, a great player of games of risk and the stock exchange, a wily gambler who knows how to deploy his troops and diplomats by telegram and hastily scrawled letter, but not a *runner*. Not a man who could run, who could hide, who could stay hidden. You misread your opponent, Abhik Lee, and we are glad.

What a merry runaround you have been given! You scoured Nakhon Sawan, tore through the forests to the north, sent scouts into farms and villages, boats onto lakes, soldiers onto trains. You pestered the police chief of Phrae so much the man started crying at you down the telephone, only for word to come from Lampang – Lampang of all places! – that a man matching your quarry's description was seen buying train tickets to both Bangkok and Chiang Mai!

Then you had to reposition in a terrible hurry, soldiers to one end of the line, policemen to the others, spies in all the trains in between. You raced across the country to Lampang, but by the time you were there, your quarry was in Chiang Mai, and by the time you reached Chiang Mai, your target was gone. Yet close: so close! So close you have come, you can feel it, you know you have been almost close enough to touch (at your best moment since he fled Bangkok, you have only been three miles away) yet somehow still Remy, indolent, indulged Remy, has slipped through your net.

Where is he now?

Over three hundred miles between Chiang Mai and Bangkok, who knows where he jumped from the train?

But you are persistent, Abhik Lee; you have a plan.

That must be why you left the troops in place at either end of the line.

Chapter 33

“Won’t you come in?”

Remy turned to see the source of the voice which called his name, speaking confident French, from the open door of the compartment next to his.

The owner of the voice was neither young nor old, neither remarkable nor plain, but rather of that middling sort that is nothing at all, of no country, no time, no place. We have seen him before, you and I, right when the game began, and can give him a name, and call him Silver.

“The conductor won’t bother us for a little while,” he added with a smile as Remy hesitated in the corridor. “He’s not as interested in his job as he pretends.”

Slowly, head still half turned towards the teeming platform, Remy slipped into the compartment, and Silver pulled the door shut behind him, settling down in a seat away from the window.

For a while, the two men regarded each other, and said not a word.

“There’s a price I’m going to ask,” said Silver at last.

“A price?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of price, and for what service?”

“I would have thought the service was obvious,” replied Silver, hands resting across his folded legs. “I will get you out of this station, and in Wiang Sa district in three days’ time, a man will see a foreigner who matches your description walking through the woods. That should buy you a little time to do those things that you have come here to do.”

“And what things have I come here to do?” he asked.

Silver shrugged. “None of my business, old thing.”

“How did you find me?”

“I have some resources.”

“Why would you help me?”

“I am not interested in seeing you lose.”

“That is…unusual for a player. The Gameshouse promotes the victory of the strongest: that is its very purpose. The weak fall and new challengers arise; the games grow more complicated, the stakes evolving with time. If it is my time…”

“It is not,” replied Silver quickly. “That is…I do not consider this game you are playing to be balanced. Hide-and-seek is an ancient game with a fine tradition, but the context of this match is not fairly suited. The lesser player is going to defeat the stronger one because the board was skewed to this effect.”

“I took the bet, Silver; no one forced me.”

“Indeed, that was reckless of you, and only you can carry the responsibility of that particular indiscretion. But the very wager you made is telling. If you win, you get some snippets of life; not as much in the grand scheme of what I know you have already won. If Abhik wins, he takes your memories, and such memories they are, Remy! With his ambition and your experience, Abhik Lee could be a phenomenal player, stronger than almost any other in the higher league. And the game – hide-and-seek in a country where everything about you, your present fashionable attire apart, makes it nearly impossible for you to hide? You are a good player, Remy, no one would deny it, but I have some sense of the cards Abhik Lee has been dealt, and I would wager that when you receive *your* cards, they are of a lesser sort. That is not in keeping with the spirit of the Gameshouse, and things which are not in keeping interest me. Do you know why Abhik is so interested in beating you?”

“I cannot imagine.”

“Have you played him before?”

“Not at a higher league game, no.”

“But at a lower one?”

“We played poker once.”

“Who won? You?”

“I had a lucky hand.”

Silver’s smile briefly withered into a scowl. “‘Luck’ is a dangerous concept in the Gameshouse.”

“Nevertheless. I needed a straight and got one against the laws of probability.”

“I cannot imagine the game swung on this one moment.”

“It did not but it was a big bet towards the latter parts of the game and the hand which, I think, broke Abhik’s will to victory.”

“What did he lose?”

“Money, nothing more.”

“No life, no sense, no memory, no emotion, no…?”

“It was a lower league game, Silver,” Remy barked harder than he’d meant, eyes flickering again to the rapidly emptying platform outside. “We didn’t play for anything that mattered.”

Silence in the carriage. Outside, the rain hammered on the roof of the station and the last of the train’s passengers were shuffled through the cordon of men. A captain, looking to have a bright idea, gestured a few of his men onto the train, starting at the engine, moving down the carriages, checking each door, every nook, just to be secure.

Remy shifted uneasily in his chair. “You mentioned a price,” he murmured.

“Yes, so I did.”

“You can get me through the station undetected?”

“I can, and spread a little of a false trail for you – not much, not so much that anyone could say it was cheating.”

“And in return?”

“I will need you to show mercy to someone, when the day comes.”

“That doesn’t sound so hard – what’s the catch?”

“You’ll be very afraid when you have to do it.”

Silence. A leak in the roof of the station let a thin trickle of water fall, like a rattling string, into a growing puddle. A seller of bananas was hustled on by a soldier who hadn’t received a bribe. A child cried, frightened of the engine. Silver waited; Remy stared at nothing until at last a little smile spreads across his face.

“You’re afraid of Abhik Lee,” he murmured.

Silver raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

“You already admitted it. His ambition, my memories – he would indeed be a deadly player. Perhaps good enough to challenge you.”

“He would lose if he challenged me,” replied the other, a sharpness breaking through the good-humour in his voice. “But as a piece in someone else’s hand, he could present…an inconvenience…in larger games.”

“To prevent him, you help the lesser player?”

“You are not the lesser player, Remy.”

“Am I not? As I said: I chose this game. That already makes me weak.”

“Weak in Abhik’s mind, perhaps,” he replied. “Abhik thinks that a game can only be won with ruthlessness and calculation. Were this chess, he would be right, but you, Remy, you have the greatest gift of a higher league player – you remember that your pieces are human. At a superficial level, some might say that makes you kind, but I would suggest it makes you beautiful. To play people is a vastly more elegant skill than mere number-counting.”

Silence. Remy lent back in his chair, fingers folded together, lips pursed. Outside, a soldier called to another, “On me – come, come, let’s look.”

Silver spoke a little faster, eyes flickering to the compartment door. “There are…anomalies…in the Gameshouse. We tell ourselves that the games we play are fun, sport, selfish, merriment. But we play with countries. We command armies. We toy with economic goods, with ideas and men. We have crowned kings, toppled tyrants, guided generals to a victory that would not otherwise have been their own. We have, through our merriment, shaped human history, altered it, changed the fate of men. The structure of our activities as a game, a sport, gives us great advantages. We have a ruthlessness, an intellectual vigour, which might be denied from a queen who was fearful for the welfare of her son, or a captain who had grown to love his men. To us, these things are merely pieces, resources to be moved to the greatest effect, and from this brutal mathematics, we pluck victory where there might otherwise have been defeat. All for the game. And where does that game come from? Who puts the pieces in our hands, shows the board, umpires the event? Why, *she* does. The Gamesmaster. She controls us because she controls the board, and though the Gameshouse claims that all its games are even, sometimes you can find a flaw. A competition to crown a king where the players are not evenly matched, or the pieces are handicapped without this disadvantage being declared. A player who is dealt a general where you only received a major. She drew Russia; you only found Belgium in your hand. A challenge which should not have been accepted – terms struck which should not have been agreed to, and sometimes the Gameshouse intervenes and sometimes it does not, and for a house that lives by rules, I have yet to see reasons given as to why. Why did the house let you bet your mind, Remy? It is not an even wager. Why did it let you take a bet in a country where your very face was a handicap of almost insurmountable

difficulties? Umpires have intervened to prevent lesser imbalances; why not now?”

A sound at the end of the carriage – soldiers voices, boots, the opening of compartment doors.

Remy said, his eyes not leaving Silver’s face, “I chose this. This was my mistake.”

“Perhaps it was. Perhaps I am wrong. Or perhaps we are merely pieces in the Gamesmaster’s hand, and she has decided to discard you for someone new.”

Voices in the carriage, nearer. Remy didn’t move, hands together, breath soft. “So you are going to challenge her. You are going to play the great game.”

A moment in which Silver didn’t answer, his eyes darting upwards in search of thought. Then he looked back at Remy and smiled, and said simply, “Yes. Do we have an accord?”

The door to the compartment opened. Two soldiers stood framed in it. “Who are you? Why you are here?” they barked,. “What are you doing?”

And then, seeing Silver’s pale face and Remy’s too:

“You are the foreigners! Put your hands up now! Get up! Get off the train!”

The two of them moved slowly off the train, hands on their heads, the soldiers poking them from behind. They stood on the platform and waited while one man fetched the captain, and then two men returned.

The captain looked into Remy’s face and nodded in understanding. Then his gaze turned and he looked into Silver’s eyes, and his expression froze.

“Well?” asked Silver, his eyes not leaving the soldier’s face. “A bargain?”

Remy smiled and found that as he smiled, he began to laugh. He lowered his hands from his head, pressed them against his sides and laughed. “Yes!” he exclaimed. “To hell with it, yes; I’ll play your game.”

The soldiers watched, wordless, silent. What terror was in the captain’s eyes as he looked on Silver’s face? (The terror of a man who played to enter the higher league and lost, lost his wife, his home, his child, until a stranger with silver hair came in the night and offered to give them back in exchange for a favour not yet disclosed. He who giveth, so they say, can taketh away.)

“This is not the man you are looking for,” Silver explained to the captain, indicating Remy. “Please inform your men of this fact.”

The captain nodded again, then turned to his soldiers, wrenching his eyes from Silver's face as if from the leering gaze of a corpse, and barked, "Wrong! Wrong – didn't you pay attention? These are not the men – wrong! Go back to your posts!"

The soldiers obeyed.

Silver walked Remy out of the doors of the station and together they stood for a moment in the porch, looking at the pouring rain. Silver's eyes wandered upwards as if trying to read the motion of every drop that fell. Remy watched him a while, then held out his hand and said, "A bargain, then."

Silver's eyes drifted down from the grey sky overhead. He smiled, shook Remy by the hand. "A bargain," he agreed; then, as an afterthought, "Good luck."

He turned to walk away.

Remy called after him. "Silver!" he said.

The other man stopped, look back, questioning.

"No one ever wins against the Gameshouse. You know that, don't you?"

Silver smiled and walked away.

Chapter 34

Eight days in Bangkok.

With what money he had left, he bought a suit, trousers, a new hat, dressed himself in every way as the smart European gentleman. It was easier here, and easier still now that Abhik Lee was stretched so thin. He had fled Bangkok when Bangkok was being torn apart looking for him; but now! Now no one knew where Remy was, and so Remy returned here to blend with the expats and thrill-seekers, the spies and the refugees.

He rented a room in a cheap hotel away from the water, slept beneath a net, took a bath, inspected every cut and bruise, scrape and swelling, scrubbed at his feet, his face, his hands, his nails, until every part was pink and tingled.

He slept until four in the morning, then dressed again in his ragged robes and headed towards the embassies and the clubs where embassy men go. The man he mugged that night was a British subconsul, drowsy on opium, high on the scent of adultery, his wife waiting for him patiently in Aldershot, the smell of sex still clinging to him like the anaesthetic jaws of the leech. Remy didn't have to hit him more than twice to cow him into submission, and he stole forty-seven baht from the bewildered man who, rising slowly from his opium lull, had the good sense not to report the crime to any of his seniors.

From a Singhalese man with a drooping lower lip, he bought the papers of a dead Frenchman whose corpse had been washed onshore four days earlier and whose name would never be reported to the police. In a whitewashed clubhouse built in the Washington style, with fans overhead that never turned and a bartender who sold, at a quarter of the price than that on the advertised menu, home-brewed gin and deadly rice wine he made himself, Remy found Winston Blake, sometime journalist for the London *Times* (when he could be bothered to file a story), occasional spy, affable drunk, goodtime man waiting for the divorce, fingers in every pie, sometime player at the Gameshouse until he lost a game that he could not play and was cast out into the night with

another man's asthma as his prize.

"Remy," he muttered, as the other slipped onto the stool beside him. "Not dead, yet?"

"Not yet, Winston," he replied, gesturing at the bartender for a drink. "Can I top you up?"

"Don't see why not, sport, don't see why not."

They talked.

"The Japs don't want to invade Siam, you see," he grumbled. "This place is a little fish, something that can be scooped up easily enough once they've got the prize."

"And what's the prize?"

"Singapore! Malaysia! Take out the British first, take out the big resistance, get your guns ready to do India and once you've got all of South-East Asia in the bag, nibble up Siam as an afterthought."

"And what are the British doing about this?"

"Bugger all, lad, bugger all!" he wheezed, panting for breath in the settling evening heat. "What can they bloody do about it? Hard enough time keeping the natives in line, let alone dealing with some imperialist samurai whatsit. You see that man over there…?" He pointed with a purple-tinted finger, subtle as a torpedo, delicate as a hurricane. "He's one of the Jap lot. Lovely man, really. Genuinely believes – this is the part I love – genuinely believes that he's going to free Asia from the colonial oppressor. That Japan will come as liberators, not conquerors, and that by going to war against the Brits and the Frogs and that lot, he's *defending* his country from the inevitable European scourge! At least the Europeans have the good grace to have given up on any pretence of dignity or generous feeling. Bless him –" he waved cheerfully at the victim of this analysis, who tilted his drink in reply – "he's a good sport, and a not half-bad spy, but he's terribly mistaken."

"In what way?"

"His bosses! His bosses talk the whole 'liberation from the colonial' stuff, but they're ideologues and bullies, the lot of them. No good having a decent middle management if the word from the top is cleanse the ethnics and that, is there?"

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

“Where will you be when all this happens?”

“Oh, India, I think. Or Ceylon. Far from here as I can get, really!”

“Another drink?”

“You’re a sport, Remy, always have been, always a sport.”

And later:

“Do you remember Abhik Lee?”

“God, yes! Unpleasant sort, but good at the game, if I recall. Played an extraordinary hand of monopoly once against a Yank who was something big in rubber. Won half the plantations of Malaysia, a US senator and the love of the Yank’s wife, all because the other’s tanker got caught by pirates in the Strait of Malacca. Personally I thought the wife business was a bit much since he clearly didn’t love her, but he was always a vindictive little sod, was Abhik, winning things he didn’t need simply to prove that he could.”

“I’m playing a game with him.”

“Good God, are you? Which one?”

“Hide-and-seek.”

“You’re seeking?”

“Hiding, as a matter of fact.”

“Bloody hell, sport, you’ll do better than to come round here. Half the people in this godforsaken place are trying to get into the Gameshouse, you know how quickly they’ll rat you out?”

“I’ve put up a smokescreen.”

“Won’t last – chap like you stands out.”

“That’s why I’m doing a little legwork now. I was wondering if, in your easy way of things, you knew where Abhik lived?”

“Don’t get me involved in your stuff, Remy; I’m out of the Gameshouse and have the failing lungs to prove it. Bet my sclerosis against his asthma and look where I am now!”

“Perhaps I could help with that?”

“Only if you win, sport, only if you win.”

“Well then – help me win.”

And the night after that…

He caught her as she was getting on a ferry heading south towards the sea. She wore grey; he wore a large hat pulled low against the torchlight; she saw

him in the corner of her eye and smiled anyway, recognised him for what he was.

As the ferry chugged slowly through the waters, he worked his way round to her until, like two strangers meeting upon a lonely voyage, he stood by her side, hands folded on the railing, and said,

"Thene."

"Remy."

"How are you?"

The woman called Thene considered, her lips thinning and stretching as she toyed with an answer. "Well," she said at last. "Still here." Beautiful Thene, we remember you from another time, another game, do we not? And you are still here, your dark hair shorter now, your smile older, your features as beautiful and unchanging as the moon. You wore a mask once, and played to crown a king in Venice. That mask is gone, and yet perhaps all it did was sink into your flesh, become your flesh, a thing invisible that you wear still.

"I hear you're in the middle of a game," she murmured.

"Indeed."

"Silver mentioned something."

"Ah – I wondered if he would."

"How's it going?"

"Abhik's going to win."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I assume you haven't come to me for help?"

"There's nothing in the rules which says I can't."

"But to ask another player for assistance would be…*extraordinarily* dangerous," she mused, turning her weight on the rail to regard him better. "Think of the concessions I could get from Abhik if I were to tell him about this conversation now."

"You could," he conceded, "probably get more from Abhik than I can offer you, and in doing so you could guarantee that he wins, whereas by helping me you merely shift the balance of probability against my losing."

"The matter is settled then – I must help Abhik."

"However…" he interjected, laying his hand gently on her cold arm, "…if you did help me win, you would have in your debt a player far older, and far less temperamental in his loyalties than Abhik is now."

"A player who got drunk and took a foolish bet," she retorted, pulling her skin gently free from his touch, "is not a player whose services I can rely on."

“Then help me for your code,” he said, moving round quickly to block her view as she turned away.

“My code? I am a player,” she replied. “I have no code except victory and the game.”

“I think we both know that isn’t true, Thene. I have played you in both lower and higher league games, and you have beaten me every time save once. The one time you did not win, you would not sacrifice the life of the woman you had embedded in my minister’s palace. You knew what he would do to her when her treachery was found out and though exposing her would have won you the game, you played a different piece and were mistaken, and it was the only game you lost.”

“Sometimes I make mistakes.”

“You lost two oil wells, a railway company, a seat in the Politburo and your appreciation of the taste of strawberries from that game. I have never seen you make mistakes of that kind since.”

“I won back the taste of strawberries over a game of snap,” she answered easily. “Where, if memory serves – and it always does – you lost your perception of the richness of the colour purple.”

“Which only proves my point – that you have always beaten me, except that once.”

She sighed and turned back to face the water, her eyes elsewhere, but her body still here, still waiting. We watched and waited with her as Remy waited too, holding tight to the edge of the railing as Thene studied the waves parting before the ship.

“What do you want, Remy?”

“I need to learn something of Abhik Lee’s past. Where he came from, games he’s won, his form, his style.”

“You have pieces; why use mine to gather this?”

“My pieces are outside this country. If I accessed them, I would be in violation of the rules of the game.”

“My,” she murmured, “Abhik really did nail you on this one, didn’t he? Why did you come here, Remy? You were drunk and you agreed to play a game in a country where you have no resources. You should have stayed in India where you have enough pieces to have an advantage in any game.”

“Where would be the challenge in that?”

They watched the water a while, the two of them in silence. Then he said,

“Silver’s going to play the great game.”

“I know. He’s been preparing for a very long time. Don’t look so surprised. As you say, I am a very old player. I have observed my enemy’s form. Silver has been gathering pieces into his hand for centuries now, building up a reserve to rival the Gamesmaster for when he eventually makes his challenge.”

“And when do you think that will be?”

“Soon, perhaps – soon.”

“And do you think he can win?”

“I don’t know. Both he and the Gameshouse hide their resources and their intentions. You would be unwise to trust either.”

“Do you think the Gameshouse has an agenda?” She didn’t answer. “Thene. Your silence speaks volumes.”

“You interpret as you will,” she replied, eyes not rising from the river. “My silence will not sway you from your course.”

“Will you help me?”

“I will need something in return, some day.”

“Name it.”

“I don’t yet know. A favour. Information. A piece. Something of that ilk – in proportion, of course, to the risk – in proportion. We must always be balanced in these things, must we not?”

“It’s yours.”

“Then I shall see what I can learn.”

“Thank you.”

“It is merely an exchange,” she replied, turning away from the water and drawing herself up straighter. “This too is part of the game, though perhaps we flatter ourselves in thinking that we are the ones who play it.”

So saying, she walked away.

Chapter 35

The next morning, a report reached the ears of Abhik Lee that Remy Burke – or at least a man conforming to his appearance – had been seen in Khon Kaen. So certain was the news that Abhik Lee at once boarded the first train heading north, leaving behind him three other entirely separate yet plausible sightings of Remy in Bangkok.

We wave goodbye to Abhik at the railway station, and he does not return the courtesy.

That night, information came to Remy Burke and two hours later, he lets himself into Abhik Lee's private rooms in Ratanakosin.

Thrilling intrusion! We drift through Abhik's life, seeing spread in all the things he possesses the story of this man. We feel godlike, naughty, wonderfully intelligent as we pick through his belongings, knowing him to be far away. Who would live a normal life when they could live like thieves and umpires as we do now? He has lived in this place a good long while, not three streets from the Grand Palace. The fans swirl slowly in the ceiling overhead, the flies press against the mesh across the windows, the shutters closed behind them. A mosquito net hangs across a dishevelled double bed – dishevelled because he had not time to make it when news came to send him north, dishevelled because Abhik Lee will trust no man with his privacy, his possessions.

He has taken all information regarding his pieces, those generals and colonels, diplomats and ministers who he has been playing from his hand – but there is still plenty to examine. Shelves of books: *Das Capital* to *Mein Kampf*, Dostoevsky to Hemmingway, Ishwar Gupta and Kavi Kant, Sunthorn Phu and Sei Shonagon. When did Abhik learn to read medieval Japanese? (A game of detectives in an Iranian country palace. A minor princeling was found dead and Abhik caught the killer before his rival could do the same.

Abhik had bet his knowledge of Hindi versus the rival's study of Japanese – a good bet fairly played.) A kitchen stocked with rice and vegetables, nothing too sugary, no meat at all. No alcohol, but water three-times filtered, boiled and cooled. So eager was Abhik to leave Bangkok that a bowl of rice stands cold and glutinous by the sink, the dirty spoon hanging off it, flies coming to feast. Seven different kinds of tea, including a jar consisting of several different kinds stirred together in perfect proportion. A map of Bangkok – abandoned – and when he dials the telephone exchange, the last number they connect him with is the personal number of the Minister of the Interior.

A small table set with incense. A small pillow on the floor before it, curved with the shape of Abhik's knees. It might have been an altar, so carefully is each part arranged, but no deity stands watching, no symbol is invoked. A gramophone player. The music is the Indian sitar. He rifles through records underneath as the music plays. Wagner, Elgar, Mozart, Muddy Waters and Billie Holiday.

The bathroom is small and bare. Cracked tiles on one wall in blue and white, a gently rotting bathmat flung across the side of the tub, a basin stained faintly yellow around the plug. He opens the cupboard and finds it bare of essentials – Abhik took his toothbrush at least to Khon Kaen. He rummages through the small wicker bin below and pulls out a brown glass jar with a dipper in it. A label on the front has Abhik's name, a date and a trademark – Oculimol. The bottle is empty, the date within the last three weeks. Remy had lost track of time until his return to the city.

He slips the bottle into his pocket and lets himself out the way he came in.

Chapter 36

On his fifth day in Bangkok, a letter was posted under his door.

How the letter came to his door – how Thene found him – he will never know, and we, respecting the privacy of a player, will not tell.

Within it was listed every game Abhik had played, the stakes wagered, the prizes won, the prizes lost.

In seven years, he had been busy, winning a small fortune in territorial concessions, willing governors, questionable executives, busy generals. In the last nine months he had gone to some extraordinary lengths to win prizes in Siam, including, Remy couldn't help but see, a great many of the military men who had so recently seized power – always, but always! – in the name of the king. In this country most things, we know, are in the name of a king. Only once did Remy see his own name – that night he played poker with Abhik, a lower league game, nothing of significance, surprised, impressed even, that it cropped up on Thene's list.

He read the list once, and then read it again, and only on the second view did he find the game he was looking for.

On the sixth day, Abhik Lee returned to Bangkok and that same night, Remy thought he saw two men watching his hotel. He moved that very hour, fleeing through the dark, but he was fearful now, his deal with Silver done, an end coming to the chase.

He has run for nearly three months. No one could have believed that Remy Burke would stay hidden for so long.

On the seventh day, as he walked towards the river, he heard the sound of a motorcycle behind him, and looking back, saw two men approaching, one riding behind the other, arms about his waist. He did not recognise their faces, but he knew their intentions, and ran. They followed, swinging round and past him, the man on the back of the bike throwing himself into Remy's

path, the driver coming back to cut off Remy's escape. Too soon, too soon, they had found him too soon!

Remy runs straight at the nearest man, tackling him with a bear-hug around the waist. They both tumble; someone strikes someone else, someone falls, someone kicks, someone snarls, someone – Remy! – bites the other's man face! He bites him like a dog, gnaws and gouges, a wild animal; where did this come from?! (It came from the forest, from the mud, from the heatstroke and the hunger, the thirst and the fear.) And for a moment – for an implausible, incredible moment – Remy is winning. Pounding a stranger to death in a dirty street in Bangkok, while the wives look on from their open windows and the passers-by know better than to get involved, involved with a *European* at that, a man who'll complain to his embassy who'll use it as an excuse to commit…some implausible excess not yet fantasised in the ambassador's mind…the people look on until, coming up behind him, the driver of the motorbike starts pummelling Remy as hard as he can with a tin helmet.

Remy falters.

Stumbles.

Falls.

Blood runs down his face, his neck.

The skin is shredded from his knuckles.

His arms are red and will soon be purple, brown, black.

This is it, Remy Burke, we whisper to him. This is the last game you will ever play, the death of your mind, the destruction of everything you are. Abhik could have been kind, challenged you to play to the death, but no! He wanted you to live, ignorant and forgetful, wanted to steal your senses, your memories of the prayers of the holy men as they crawled towards Varanasi, the smell of the fires besides the Ganges, the shrieking of the jungles that encroached on the holy places of Laos and Cambodia. He wants the memories of your mother's song, your father's stories, the touch of your fingers on bare flesh, the excitement of a tongue in your mouth, the smell of moonlight, the thrill of victory, the line of Fon's back as she turned away, he wants your *soul*. And when he has it, he'll watch you wander, bewildered and afraid through the world, and laugh at you in silence, and turn away without another thought. This is what Abhik Lee will do to you when he's won, so get up! Get up and *fight*!

Remy kicks out, blind, blood in his eyes, and catches someone's leg. He kicks again, and the man who stumbled is now collapsing, a foot buried in his stomach, winded but whole. The breath buys him a moment; he takes it. Remy rolls to one side, chest burning, face streaming, heart rushing, crawls on his hands and knees to the edge of the road, strangers parting about him, crawls to his feet and, half blind, he staggers up and runs.

He gets nearly half a mile before he collapses in the doorway of a house.

A woman opens it and starts screaming.

He manages another quarter of a mile before he falls down again. Three men and two women walk by before a woman with a child stops to ask if he is all right, if he needs to get to a hospital.

No hospital. Abhik Lee knows now he's in Bangkok, and will know too that he's injured. He'll be watching the hospitals.

Water, he begs, and the woman brings him water from a pump.

How do I look? he asks.

Terrible, she replies. You need help.

No help. You're very kind. No help.

Remy crawls on, towards the gathering night.

Chapter 37

Here we are.

You and I, here we are again, standing before the doors of the Gameshouse.

It is night over Bangkok. A bone-rattling, engine-snorting, ting-a-linging, come-all-ye-unto-the-roaring night. We knock on the silver doors of the Gameshouse and they let us in, shutting out the city. Here, the sound of the sueng, plucked by an old man with a red hat upon his head, ears grown long, gold around his throat. A pair of girls in blue and pearl duet on the many-stringed khim, while a singer pushes her voice as high as the eagle's flight to tell the story of sad kings, broken hearts, lost empires, forgotten lives. Here the players of the lower league – so many players, so many mighty men and women looking to be something more! – challenge each other for gold and time, favours and secrets, as if they matter. As if this board is the one we have come to love. How many of these would-be great players will end up pieces? (Twenty-two of the fifty-eight here assembled. Twenty-two of the gathered players will bet a little too much, lose a little too heavily and when they are in the pit of their despair, a woman in white will come to them and say, "Can I interest you in something different?" A high number indeed; a significant percentage of those congregated here, as though, we muse, as though there are those called to the Gameshouse to play only so that they might be played upon, and in their falling increase the sum resources of the Gamesmaster, of she who sits on high. Yet these are thoughts for another time, another roll of the dice, and so we move on.)

Through another pair of silver doors, lions roaring from the panelling, up a corridor too long for this building, to the place where the higher league plays. Oh now here, *here* we see the true players, the men and women who know that the world is a board, and only toss a coin when they are sure which way it will land.

We are looking for one player in particular, and tonight we find him.

Godert van Zuylen. He was sent, so the rumours say, to a tiny island in the middle of nowhere after he got his boss's daughter pregnant and would not agree to the marriage. The population of that place was seventy-three, but no! Seventy-three, it transpired, was the number of those people that the Dutch authorities had actually managed to count, and being as they were uninterested in the interior, they had not found the two thousand that lived on the side of a volcano and worshipped the fire and the sea. Van Zuylen found them, and even here, even they, it seemed, had heard of the game, for one day a door was opened at the back of a cave, and within he found the sound of cards, dice and the beating of the ritual drum.

Now he owns the father and the daughter both who had him sent away. He won them in a game of codebreaker's scrabble in 1917, by use of a one-time pad dropped behind Austrian lines. Two thousand men died that day, and he was victorious by the rules of the game and he never looked back.

We approach, but wait!

Another approaches first. Remy Burke, fancy seeing you here!

His appearance causes some commotion. Blood still clings to the collar of his shirt, laces the ends of his hair. His trousers are torn, knees scuffed, fingers dirty, knuckles swollen, jaw red, eyes black. He makes directly for van Zuylen, and others part before him, though many stare.

He sits down opposite van Zuylen and says to the white-clad waiter who cautiously approaches, "Water please."

Water is bought in a cup chilled with ice, a slice of lemon in the side, a sprig of mint at the bottom. Where does the Gameshouse find all these things? A low priority on the list of questions we must ask.

At last van Zuylen says in careful French, "You look terrible, Remy."

"You look well."

"I had good fortune in a game I played."

"Ah – that explains your youthful glow! How much did you win?"

"Only five years. It was a brief skirmish, that was all. My planes had the better engines."

"Of course they did – you are a professional."

"Indeed. May I help you?"

"You played a game against Abhik Lee here some seven months ago."

"Ah, the delightful Mr Lee. Yes, I played him, though I do not think it is good form to discuss the matter, do you?"

“It’s not a discussion that interests me: it’s the wager.”

“I do not think it’s good form to discuss that either – unless, that is, you propose to offer something in return?”

Remy is silent for a moment, staring down at the table. At last he says, “I am in the middle of a game. I cannot access my resources until the game is done.”

“Then I fear we cannot…”

“How about cards?”

Van Zuylen hesitates. “You are already occupied, are you not?”

“A lower league game, a skirmish, nothing more.”

“And what could you wager for this game?”

“What would you like?”

The Dutchman purses his lips, turns his head thoughtfully to the ceiling of the room. “How about…the affections of the last person who loved you?”

“That’s a big wager for a small game.”

“You seem…desperate.”

“I’m not sure the umpires would appreciate you taking advantage of my condition.”

“It is a lower league game, that is all. Backgammon, perhaps, or chess? I’ll let you decide.”

“I had always thought you were more sporting than that, Godert.”

He shrugs. “The word is you agreed to a game with Abhik Lee while drunk. Most likely you will lose. What is the good for me in playing a man who is already beaten, unless I get to pick at some of the bones?”

Remy smiles thinly. “Chess then,” he says, and his voice is dry. “You can be white, if you like.”

Chapter 38

A game of chess.

We watch.

So does half the Gameshouse.

These people have seen a lot, but a blood-soaked player, in the middle of a match of hide-and-seek, staggering into their halls? Why, that – that is still a sight to see. We are drawn, we are drawn, by the smell of blood in the water.

Who was the last person who loved Remy?

He is not sure he can say for certain, but we can, and so can you too, Remy, if you try. She waits for you in a broken hut in the forest, the moon above and the waters of the lake below, your widow in the woods. We do not think you shall return to her, and neither does she, but such a predicament does not diminish the force of her affection. Van Zuylen will have her, if he wins, like a trophy on the wall.

You should not gamble a thing that is not yours, Remy.

You should not bet a thing you cannot afford to lose.

It is not in keeping with your code.

We watch, waiting for Remy to lose.

He plays black; van Zuylen is white.

He opens aggressively, swaps a bishop for a knight, a knight for a bishop, opens up the centre of the board, pawn takes pawn takes pawn takes pawn. The pieces fall, the centre is exposed. King's castle, racing to opposite sides of the board, taking cover. The queens square off, Remy eyes an exchange, van Zuylen…

…flinches.

It is not yet time, the Dutchman seems to say, to take the most powerful piece from the board.

Remy studies his face now, as the queen moves away.

It is not an error per se to retreat from the exchange, but it is…indicative.

Does van Zuylen see something in the bloodied features of his opponent?

(He does. He sees the chief of the tribe on the unnamed island where, as a philanderer who'd philandered too far, he has been sent. He sees the ancient man dancing with the bones of slaughtered sharks around his neck, hears the beating of the drum, feels blood in his face, his neck, his fingertips, rises up spontaneously to dance himself, spins round and round with the chief and the chieftain's daughter and the chieftain's wife until he realises that the flesh he was eating is raw, and the drums are now silent, the whole village watching him gorge, and him alone. There is a darkness in their silence, a violence waiting to spill, but they do not move, do not speak as he crawls away back to the trading post in the bay, and the drums do not beat, and he does not dance again. Now van Zuylen looks again into the sun-soaked, blood-soaked face of Remy Burke and sees violence in it, and power, and tastes raw flesh in his mouth, and hears the beating of the drum, and is mightily afraid.)

A piece falls; only a pawn, and at some tactical risk.

Van Zuylen reclaims the next pawn four moves later, then another, his pulse rising as he sniffs victory.

He is wrong – not a victory, a trap. He was lured in by the taste of easy pickings and now his rook is trapped, pinned by a combination of king and knight. He tries to run, has nowhere to go and with a sigh throws away his rook for one last pawn, and knows that the game is nearly over, though he is not sure where death will come.

Death comes three moves after the inevitable queen exchange.

He resigns when it becomes definite, and the watchers, save for us, drift away.

Remy says, "You owe me some information."

"What would you like to know?" the Dutchman asks, and finds that he is exhausted.

"Seven months ago you played Abhik Lee at a game, and Abhik lost. Here's my question – what was his forfeit?"

Van Zuylen smiles, though his hands are shaking.

"Oh," he says. "Now I understand."

Chapter 39

It is the small hours of the morning, the glow before dawn, when Remy leaves the Gameshouse.

The streets of Bangkok are at last silent, save for the distant ringing of a ship's bell, the thump of a door slamming in an alley, the shriek of a stray cat.

The men are waiting outside: three soldiers and a colonel. We know who tipped them off, and we understand – Abhik Lee is a good player to have on your side.

This time they leave nothing to chance. Two men have grabbed Remy by the arms, a third snapping the handcuffs on, and before he can tut and say, "So it goes," they bundle him into a car and rush him through the empty, grubby streets. They take him to a house above a canal, bundle him up three flights of stairs, push the door open to reveal a room where the slowly rising light of dawn now creeps across the floor in perfectly defined squares, showing a desk, a chair, a bed, an oil lamp burning down. They sit him in the chair, and from the room next door the sound of water in a bowl rises, sloshes, ceases.

They wait.

Abhik Lee dries his face, his hands, the side and back of his neck with a towel, and steps at last into the room. He wears a waistcoat and long shirt sleeves, a watch hooked in his pocket, the chain slung across his tight belly. Perhaps he slept like that? How, Remy wonders, did he avoid crinkles?

"You did well, Remy," he says, reaching forward to touch the side of Remy's bruised face. "Better than I thought you would."

"Thank you."

Abhik hesitates, his fingers hovering above Remy's skin. Then he lets his hand drop, brushing his enemy's sleeve, his arm, squeezing tight a moment against the bruises along the bone, hard enough to make Remy flinch, before gently letting go. He turns away from his prisoner, straightening his tie, and as he examines himself in the mirror breathes softly, "Tag. You're it."

Chapter 40

They gave Remy three days' grace.

Time to heal, they said.

On the third day, he was given his deck of hands.

Majors, the wives of ministers, a handful of priests, some nuns, a couple of traders, a medley of spies, a hunter from South Africa, a tracker from Nepal, a good hand, no doubt, a decent collection of pieces to play, but not nearly good enough.

He wondered then what Silver would say.

(He would smile and say nothing at all. Remy has not seen Abhik's hand but he has sensed its power, and senses now perhaps that the cards he holds, the randomly shuffled, randomly dealt cards, are bad. If they were random at all.)

He smiled at the umpire who delivered them to him and said, "Thank you very much."

The umpire's face was invisible, hidden behind her veil as she walked away.

On the fourth day, he summoned two of his pieces – a Bengali soldier, famed for having first killed then fallen in love with the great mountain tigers – and a Bangkok gangster, who boasted that his cousin owned all of Hong Kong and had dealt opium to Queen Victoria herself! The thief had a car; the soldier had a gun. Together, they went to the Gameshouse.

The umpire stood outside to wait with them until the allotted time. They lounged on the bonnet of the car, chewing tendrils of squid until twelve p.m. struck, at which point Remy put his watch away, slipped into the passenger seat and said, "I'm thinking about a show."

They went to the cinema. When the national anthem played, the entire audience rose in solemnity and stood again when newsreel footage showed the king inspecting some general's latest triumph.

We, servants of his great majesty,
Prostrate our hearts and heads,
To pay respect to the ruler, whose merits are boundless,
Outstanding in the great Chakri dynasty,
The greatest of Siam.
…May it be that whatever you will be done,
According to the hopes of your great heart,
As we wish you victory, hurrah!

When the film was done, Remy looked at his watch again and, tutting, said, "How about temple?"

They went to Pathum Wanaram, assured by the thief that it was out of the way enough to be quiet, but royal enough to be majestic. The soldier stayed outside, refusing to enter the grounds of a place so ornate and contrary to his faith. The thief galloped in, bounded up the steps two at a time, bought a great handful of incense and prostrated himself before every monk and icon he saw. Remy watched a crowd saluting the ashes of a long-dead king, sat a while by the roaring mouth of a kylin, a half-dragon, half-lion which guarded this royal place, heard the beating of the gong and watched the shadows stretch and said at last, "Wasn't that nice? Let's have some supper."

They ate prawns and fried fish, octopus legs and crinkled green cabbage purchased from a vendor by the river, who swore that his father was the greatest fisherman of the bay, and had once caught a shark bigger than his boat which took three days to die even after it was hooked and harpooned and dragged to land.

"It didn't die even on land?" asked Remy politely.

"No! It only died when my mother cut its heart out, still beating, and threw it back into the sea! True story!"

All the truest stories, we knew, ended with these sacred words.

When the sun was down, and they'd washed the oil and grease of their fishy meal from their hands, the thief said, enthused by the adventure that the day had begun:

"Where next, sir?"

The soldier sighed, and at Remy's expression shrugged and said, "I was

brought here to hunt."

"How many hours has it been since the hunt began?"

"Nine, ten?"

"That should be long enough," he replied, and turning to the thief, "Take me to the Gameshouse."

Chapter 41

Again, the silver doors; again, the sound of music.

Again, the rolling of the dice; again, the laughter of strangers who will never really be friends, not truly, not while they play the game.

Heads turn as Remy enters, his soldier in tow, the thief left with the car.

“He can’t come in here,” says the umpire guarding the gateway to the halls of the higher league.

“He is a piece, and I am a player,” replies Remy firmly. “We are playing a game.”

The umpire hesitates, then nods, and the two of them go in.

Through the halls, heads turn, people stare; we move past the lives that are being made, the dreams that are being broken, the wonders won, the lives lost, the battle of mind against mind, brute intelligence and skill; governments fall, empires turn; this is the Gameshouse, where humanity is a symbol, the world an object – come and play if you dare; come into the Gameshouse.

A smaller wooden door at the back, a darkened stair heading up. Usually it is guarded but as Remy approaches, the umpire stands back because the umpires – why, they enforce the rules of the game, and Remy is a player, the game goes on, on, yay even up this dark flight of stairs where usually only the umpires go, up and up too many floors, we think, for this house, too many doors leading to either side but Remy keeps going, knows in his belly where to go, up towards the place where the Gamesmaster, so beautiful though she is lost in white, so beautiful, until she became what she is, up even there to where the Gamesmaster resides, ruler of the house, lady of the game.

The umpire pushes back the door without Remy needing to knock, and he enters a room hung with silks, all whites and silvers, obscuring furniture, obscuring shape or size, but not obscuring *him*.

Abhik Lee, sitting by a writing desk of red lacquer. He turns as the door

opens, mouth opening, perhaps to give some command, ask some favour, but as he turns, he sees, and his mouth widens, pen and paper fall from his fingers to the floor.

Abhik Lee.

“Tag,” says Remy, catching him by the arm. “You’re it.”

Chapter 42

The soldier stood outside.

Remy stood within.

Abhik sat, frozen by the moment, still in his chair, papers at his feet, a crystal beaker of water half consumed by his elbow.

Neither man spoke.

Then Remy said, “Your side of the wager was twenty years. When you pay the forfeit, you will be an old man. Your mind will wither as well as your body. It will be a difficult loss for you to come back from. I once lost fifteen years in a match in Poland, and I nearly died while trying to claw them back. I will release you from this forfeit, spare you this death – and, I think, given how this game has gone, it will be death – if you answer some simple questions.”

Silence.

Then, “How are you here?” breathed Abhik Lee, and we have the impression that he asks this not so much of Remy but of himself, or some unseen other, who stands silently by. “How are you here?”

“I followed your eyedrops,” he replied, pulling the little glass bottle from his pocket, Oculimol on the side. “You played a game against van Zuylen seven months ago; when you lost you acquired the corneal scarring that has bothered him ever since a nasty eye infection. The scarring, while irritating, isn’t blinding, but has to be continually soothed with eye drops. You use Oculimol; it is difficult to find outside Bangkok. Finding it made it seem more likely that you would not risk leaving the city, even in a game of hide-and-seek.”

“I removed all trace,” he whispered, voice rattling over dry tongue. “There was nothing in my room.”

“There is nothing in your room now. But I came back to Bangkok over a week ago in order to investigate you, *before* you became the hunted. There is no rule against it – merely risk. By coming to Bangkok and showing myself, I

permitted you to catch me, but the danger was worth the prize. When I found the Oculimol in your rooms, I went to every pharmacy I could find. Only two receive shipments of this concoction, and only one had been asked to send a large supply to the present address of the Gameshouse. As I said: there is no rule against my hunting you when I am the hunted. Nor is there any rule forbidding you from hiding in the Gameshouse. Players stay here for weeks, months at a time. I would not think to look here since the idea is so absurd, and if you were willing to stay put in this gilded cage, avoiding contact with anyone who might be sympathetic to my cause, your preparations all in place, for a few hours longer than the time I spent running – than the hard, lonely time I spent running – then you would win without even experiencing the discomfort of an itchy eye. You did not break the rules, Abhik Lee, nor did I. Nor can it really be said that you violated the spirit of the game, or any code of honour. Your code is victory and the prize. Nothing more. Such a situation as this could bring out the vindictive streak in me; yet as I said, I will forgo my prize for a little information."

Abhik swallowed. "What kind of information?"

"Why did you challenge me?"

"You were weak."

"I am an old player – you'll have to do better than that."

"You were weak – a weak old man in a country not your own. I could win – I knew I could win."

"Did the Gameshouse ask you to challenge me?"

He didn't answer.

"Did the Gamesmaster offer to help you?"

No answer.

"What were the cards you were dealt when you hunted me?"

No answer.

Remy smiled, head on one side. "It has been a long road to this point, Abhik Lee. I travelled far and wide before I realised how I could beat you. You had me frightened and afraid, focused only on hiding, on being your prey. It took me too long to remember that I would soon become the hunter and, Abhik, I am a good hunter. I have played too long to be anything less; do not dare underestimate me. Why did you challenge me to this game?"

"I knew I could win."

"Why challenge me?"

“You cheated!” The cry, sudden, sharp and shrill, rose as Abhik did, clawing his way up from his chair, his body shaking with rage. “You cheated – the umpires should have your soul, your body – you cheated!”

“No. I am within the rules of the game.”

“Not now, not *now*,” he snarled. “Not this game, not *now*. Before!”

“Before?”

“When we played cards, you cheated!”

We struggle with Remy to place this accusation, find the heart of this raging voice. Was this…cards? Is this a game of poker, a flash of cards on the table that has Abhik raging like the lion? We think it is, and we are amazed.

“It was poker,” breathed Remy. Then, more pertinent to the point, “I did not cheat.”

“The game was mine; I had you; it was mine – you cheated.” A growl, a paring back of teeth, a pulling in of breath, Abhik was ready to burst with it and held it in under great pressure.

“I didn’t cheat.”

“You cheated.”

“I got lucky! It was lucky, a lucky hand, that’s all!”

“There is no luck!” Now Abhik let his voice burst through; now he swiped the beaker from the table, glass shattered on the floor, water speckled the white silks hung all about. He kicked at his ancient lacquered chair, beat his fists against his chest, roared and roared again, “*There is no luck!*”

Remy waited.

We waited.

Silence settled.

A silence of slowing, forced breath, of bulging eyes, of bursting veins.

We waited.

Silence.

Remy said, “What did the Gameshouse offer you?”

Silence.

“What did they promise? Better pieces? A twist in the balance of things? A prod towards weaker prey? What do they gain by my defeat?”

Silence, and the slow panting of Abhik’s breath.

“I will give you back your life,” Remy murmured. “I swear it, I will forfeit the prize, but first you tell me.”

Abhik’s breath slowed more. He reached out for his chair, found it broken

and overturned. Sunk down against the edge of the desk, couldn't seem to quite grasp it, slipped, fell to the floor. There he sat, legs splayed, eyes staring at nothing, breathing fast and shallow, not the deep gasp it had been before.

Remy squatted down in front of him.

"Tell me. Let me help you."

Slowly, Abhik looked up. He seemed to see, as if for the first time, not his enemy, not his defeat staring back at him, not even another player, but rather he looked, taking in all the shapes of Remy's face, the scars and the wounds, the marks of great hardship etched by the sun onto his skin, the freshly clotting blood, the freshly sinking bruises, the tired eyes that had squinted too long against the bright, hot day and closed only fearfully in the long, howling night. All this he saw, and for the first time seemed to see a man, and for a moment his lips parted as if he would speak, but something then moved in the curtains behind Remy where his back was turned, and Abhik's lips sealed once more.

What was it?

We turn to look, though Remy does not, and imagine we see a figure, drifting away, vanishing into silk, from where she came. We pursue but whiteness blinds us, and we cannot find her in this place. Not yet – not yet.

Then Abhik says, "No." He speaks again, and is more confident in the sound. "No."

Remy straightened, shaking his head. "I give you this chance," he said.

"No."

"I will have your life if you do not answer me."

"I…will not answer."

"Do you fear the Gamesmaster so much?"

Abhik was silent a moment, head turned to one side. Then, very quietly, "*No,*" but as he said the word, his head nodded and his eyes were fixed on Remy's own, digging into Remy's own, but then his lips sealed, and he said no more.

Chapter 43

Is this victory?

Remy stands by the Chao Phraya river, waiting for the sun to rise over the bustling waters.

Is this victory?

He closes his eyes and breathes, and it seems to him that his breath is…

…only breath.

He walks along a muddy road, a road carved in his memories, but the shapes that were so vivid before, the stories that were so bright seem now a thousand miles away.

Is this what he played for?

Is this success?

The sun peeps over the eastern-most edge of the city, a nail-thin slither of light that grows so fast, fast as the turning of the earth, spreading upwards into the great, waiting sky.

He feels…

…very tired.

Though if we were to look, we would perhaps suggest that there was a youthful quality about his skin, a freshness to his eye, a brightness to his hair, a softness to his hand that is not…that cannot be…of his usual seeming.

(And if we were to look, we might see a man walking away from the Gameshouse. He walks tall at first, though without direction, but shortly finds that his back aches and his legs are frail, so he stops and pulls a branch from a tree, and walks with it supporting him. His spine curves gently down, and when he rubs at his now-throbbing head, strands of hair come away from his fingers, their deep blackness turning grey in his hand. He looks up, and the street seems distant now, softly out of focus, and as Abhik Lee walks away, he starts to cry, the tears rolling down the ancient wrinkles and rivulets of his old, cracked face.)

Is this victory?

And then, she is there.

The Gamesmaster, all in white.

She stands beside Remy, watching the sun rise higher above the buildings, filling the sky with golden pink. The breeze off the river ripples the veil that covers her face, but though the heat is rising, she still wears gloves, trousers, robes, every part of her hidden except her voice, which now speaks clear and quiet.

“You were drunk when you took the bet,” the Gamesmaster explains. “You were drunk when you took the last five.”

“I won the last five games I played,” he retorts, not turning his eyes from the rising sun. “I *won*.”

“You played for low stakes, skirmishes barely worth the gamble. You are an old player, Remy Burke, and a good one. We were very sorry to see you losing…interest.”

“Losing interest?” he breathes, barely holding back the anger in his voice. “Is that what you saw in me? A player ‘losing interest’? Is that why you told Abhik to challenge me?”

“The Gameshouse does not control the game, nor the luck of the draw, nor the things that its players do.”

“But you didn’t stop him either,” he growls. “You let him come at me; you let an uneven game be played…”

“Was it uneven?” she replies quickly, cutting him off. “Was it unfair? You have wandered hundreds of miles, Remy Burke, and found, I think, a little bit of something which had in recent years grown occluded to you. You found, we think, a reason to play, and you won. Whatever advantages it may have appeared that Abhik had, clearly they were not overwhelming.”

“The game was uneven…”

“You won,” she repeats, cutting him off. “You won.”

Silence. Then:

“Silver is gathering pieces to himself,” she says. “Have you not told lies to win a hand? And would you not discard a piece if a better one presented itself? Do not mistake his easy words for truth.”

“Silver gathers pieces,” he replies. “And so, I think, do you. It did not violate the rules, but only by your consent could he have hidden in the Gameshouse; only by your consent could such an uneven match have been played, for such a harsh wager. If Abhik had won, if he had taken my

memories, he would have been a devastating player; if he won because of an accord between himself and you, he would have been an even more devastating piece."

"Yet he lost," she replies. "The stronger mind defeated the lesser, and we are honoured to have you play in the Gameshouse, particularly now we know the full extent of your…qualities. Who would have imagined you had so much to give; incredible what men will do when tested. Now it is known, we look forward to seeing how you play in future matches. You see, Remy, the Gameshouse wins whoever is victorious; we are enriched by your successes."

He has no answer.

Only breath and air.

The sun rises, the earth turns and he is…

…something. Something solid, something burning, something strong, something old, something new, something that has a name which now returns through the crumple of his frown, through the clenching of his jaw, through the tightness in his fist and here it is, the thing that washes away the road, stills the circling of the universe, pins the stars in their place and makes the moon wax and wane, only for him.

He is a player.

He straightens up a little more, turns his face away from the sun.

Then she says, still watching the rising light, "A great game is coming, Remy. It has been centuries in the making, but the time is soon at hand. When the game begins, be careful where the pieces fall."

"I am a player," he says. "I know how to read the board."

The Gamesmaster smiles behind her veil, and turns away.

He watches her go, and when he turns away we watch a little while longer, until she is out of sight.

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By Claire North

The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August
Touch

THE GAMESHOUSE (EBOOK NOVELLAS)

The Serpent
The Thief
The Master

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Contents

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